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[PRION ONE PENNY.]



THERE WAS A FLASH, A REPORT, AND NINA FELL BACK ON THE CHAIR IN A DEAD SWOON.

THE EMPRESS OF SONG.

[A NOVELETTE.]

CHAPTER I.

THORN VILLA.

THORN VILLA was a semi-detached residence, situate in the Brecknock-road. It was a pretty suburban dwelling, surrounded by greenery on the three sides unconnected by bricks and mortar, and was in the possession of Mrs. Maunders, an officer's widow, and her two daughters.

Mrs. Maunders' means were limited, and although she did not feel, after the life she had been accustomed to in different military stations, that she could exist or, in her own words, bury herself in the country, still she could not afford to live in the great metropolis itself in the style she had been used to; therefore, after having

visited almost all the unoccupied houses in most of the suburbs at all answering to her requirements, she finally decided on Thorn Villa—"which will always be a thorn in your side, mother," her son, who happened then to be home on leave, jokingly told her; "for no sooner will the furniture be arranged, and the girls consider themselves comfortably settled, than you will want to be off, and wish you had never seen the place."

"It might have been the case twenty years ago, Reggy, but I am getting an old woman now, and feel I want rest."

But Reggy only laughed, and bet his sister a dozen pairs of gloves that before he returned from old "Gib," two years hence, he should hear they were in a new home.

He lost, however. It was now three years since that wager was laid, and Mrs. Maunders was yet at Thorn Villa.

The adjacent one, named "Rose," perhaps so owing to the fact that the same landlord, owning both, and considering there was never a rose

without a thorn, thought it the thing; but there was one thing about the former residence that he did not think so, and that was, it was the most unlucky one he had ever owned, for either the tenants never would or could pay the rent, with the exception of the last one, who, after the second quarter, hanged himself in the drawing-room.

Since that time, now fourteen months, when our tale commences, it had remained unoccupied; for the first two after that fatal occurrence Mr. Dunstable could get no one to accept the office of caretaker, and then a man and his wife filled the post, and evidently intended to keep it as long as they lived, no one out of the many who came to view the house ever taking the trouble to return to the office or communicate with the agent after, until Mr. Dunstable's eyes suddenly became opened to their little arrangements, and in an angry mood he told them, after having lost the day previous what he considered a desirable tenant, to pack up and be off.

It was the end of May, the cruel east winds

had passed away, and every where was bright sunshine, gentle breezes, and the new fresh green in all its varied tints on the budding trees.

Mrs. Maunders' garden looked very pretty, with its raked borders, gay with spring flowers, and the morning dew sparkling on smooth, mown grass, whilst its neighbour, from which it was divided, but by a thin iron railing, was alone flourishing in chickweed and nettles, some of which even had the audacity with a gaudy dandelion to sprout up their vulgar heads on the gravel path.

"I do wish that place was let," said Cecilia, the eldest Miss Maunders, as she, with her sister, were taking a matutinal survey of their little paradise whilst awaiting their mother's appearance at the breakfast-table.

"Not more than I do," answered Mabel the younger, whilst, stooping down, she plucked out an offending weed which had dared to nestle under the branches of a choice geranium. "I declare the rubbish is growing this side now!" and she was about to carry her clearing operations a little further, when the door of Rose Villa opened, and two men, one carrying a spade and the other wheeling a barrow, entered the same.

After this fatiguing exercise the men sat so long on the latter, contemplating the work before them, and significantly jerking their heads every now and then in the direction of Mrs. Maunders' tasteful garden, evidently drawing a comparison between the two, that the girls could not wait to see them commence operations before adjourning to the breakfast-room, where their mother was seated.

Cecilia was a handsome girl of nineteen, with the dark eyes of her dead father, whom she closely resembled; whilst Mabel was but a renewed cast of his wife, her blue eyes, golden hair, and pink-white complexion forming a charming contrast to the beauty of her elder sister.

"What made you girls go into the front garden this morning!" Mrs. Maunders asked. "You know my dislike to your doing so, and thus making yourselves the object of remarks from the passers-by on the tram."

"Who cares for their remarks, mamma!" said Cissy. "They certainly do not interest us, if we do them. But what do you think I do believe that unfortunate villa is let again."

"Well, if so, I only hope they will be nice people this time, for of all things I should enjoy the society of a pleasant neighbour, for, after all, it is very dull here, with no one but ourselves to speak to."

And Mrs. Maunders heaved a sigh as her memory flitted back to the days when her rooms were gay with military uniforms and stylishly-dressed women.

"So you have succeeded in obtaining a tenant at last!" she said to Mr. Dunstable, who a few hours later arrived on the scene, and just looked in, as he told the former, to have a look at the kitchen range, of which the cook at Thorn Villa was ever complaining.

"I have," was his reply, "and, I hope, a good one; first-class references."

And then Mr. Dunstable proceeded to inform her there was nothing on earth the matter with the grate if her servant would but keep the flues clear, and he pulled out a damper, from which the soot fell in profusion, concluding with the wonder that not only how anyone could suppose an oven would draw like that, he didn't know, but that the house hadn't been on fire.

Meanwhile, the refractory and luxuriant growth of weeds were being speedily removed from the adjoining premises, when his presence being required by other workmen who had arrived to execute some repairs in the interior of the house, he told Mrs. Maunders she must excuse him.

"I suppose they have heard nothing of that unfortunate occurrence in the drawing-room!" said the latter in a low tone, whilst shaking hands.

"No," was the reply. "You see hanging is a much neater process than——" and Mr. Dunstable drew his hand figuratively under his chin—"no blood to call forth remarks. And I am sure I can trust to you, ma'am," with a bland smile. "Taken on a seven years' lease, you see; no

shooting the moon this time, I'll wager. But, I say, this won't do," he said, as, pulling out his watch, and seeing how late it was, he declared he couldn't stay another moment.

The girls had gone out for a walk. It was a lovely morning, and Mrs. Maunders, after having given her orders respecting dinner, and other household arrangements, retired to the drawing-room, from the window of which she could not only sit and enjoy the beautiful spring sun, and inhale the scent of opening flowers, but have a view of the many passing vehicles continually going to and fro in the main road.

Then her thoughts wandered until they became concentrated on what kind of people they would be next door; whether old or young, with sons and daughters, or without, ending in a little romance conjured up in her own head, which might or might not occur between the two families, in which Cissy and Mabel would take the leading characters.

Thus the time slipped away, and Mrs. Maunders had no idea how late it was until girlish voices aroused her from her reverie, and the object of her dream entered the room.

"Why, you dear mother, you look half asleep!" they said, kissing the elder lady. "You should have been out this lovely morning; it is just like summer!"

"Consequently too hot for me, my child," was the rejoinder; Mrs. Maunders's greatest aversions being heat and exertion; the former was bearable on condition she could lie on the sofa, and lazily wear the hours away; but the latter was abominable to her idea when there was no necessity for it.

"Mr. Dunstable has been here, girls," she continued, "and seemed overwhelmed with delight at the prospect of having at last obtained a good tenant for next door."

"Did he say who they were, mamma!" asked Cecilia.

"Nothing further than that a lady whose husband was abroad had taken it, and would take possession very shortly. But, look here," she said, holding out an open letter, "here's a letter from Reggy, and his regiment is under orders for England, so he may be home at any time."

"Yes, within the next twelve months," laughed Mabel. "But I am so glad; it will be so nice to have him with us again, if only for a short time."

"It seems but yesterday when he went away," said Mrs. Maunders.

"Yes, and now he is coming back a captain," Cecilia answered, proud of her brother's advancement in his profession. "You ought to be very happy, mother dear?"

"So I am, my child," was the reply; and then the conversation again reverted to surmises respecting the occupant of Rose Villa, until a servant entered to announce that lunch was on the table.

CHAPTER II.

THE NEW TENANT.

For the next fortnight workmen were busily engaged next door, which began to assume a bright and cheerful appearance, the front boasting of a coat of fresh paint, the door of new varnish, whilst the garden, with the exception of its bareness of flowers, was neat and trim as Mrs. Maunders's itself.

"Let 'em find their own plants," was Mr. Dunstable's final remark, when he came to give a last look, to see that all was in readiness for the new tenant. "We've cleared away the rubbish, and that's enough for our side of the bargain."

A few days later two pantechicon vans drew up, and discharged their valuable contents into the care of an old woman, who had been sent to the house previously to superintend the arrangement of the same; whilst the proceedings, thus carried on just under their noses, afforded quite a fund of amusement to Cecilia and her sister. But the climax of their curiosity was not reached until when a further time had elapsed, and those arrangements completed, a four-wheeled cab drove up one sunny afternoon, and a gentleman

with a lady and little boy descended from the same.

The former was a man of, maybe, thirty, with a pleasing countenance, if not decidedly handsome; his hair was dark brown, his eyes hazel, whilst under his aquiline nose a tawny moustache, long and silky, covered his upper lip, otherwise he was closely shaven; his figure tall and well-proportioned.

The lady was of middle height, but not less was she favoured with the same perfect symmetry of form. She was his junior by five years or so; her eyes were of the same hazel hue, whilst the dazzling fairness of her complexion, and the golden tinge on her hair, added much to the beauty of which she was possessed.

She was dressed in deep black, as also was the child whose hand she held. The latter was about four years old, with the same brown eyes and golden hair visible in the mother, but with the boy it fell in long ringlets on the black velvet of his attire, showing to full advantage beneath the Tam-o'-Shanter of the same material, which formed his head-dress.

"Will you call, mamma!" asked Cecilia, after a week had passed, and she considered the newcomers had had ample time to settle themselves in their abode.

"Call, my dear, when I don't even know their name! Certainly not," was the rejoinder.

So matters stood; Mrs. Maunders knowing no more of her neighbour, and the neighbour knowing no more of Mrs. Maunders, than if they had lived at the opposite poles; when, one afternoon, the latter expecting some friends, the duty of dressing the table for dinner had devolved upon Cecilia.

The roses were now in full bloom, and for the decoration of the former, she, with Mabel, had entered the front garden where they grew in great profusion. So intent were they on their employment, that, for the time, Rose Villa was entirely forgotten, as they continued to add to the floral treasures lying in the basket the younger sister carried.

"Do give me one, please!"

They both turned to whence the childish voice proceeded; it was the little boy from next door, who with wistful eyes had been watching them through the iron railing, beneath the large sun hat which rested on his golden curls.

"Only one 'little one,'" he pleaded; "we have no purty roses here," and he looked despondingly on his own barren garden.

"You shall have two or three, darling, look!" and Cecilia tied them together with a fresh green fern, and gave them to him; "but you will give me a kiss, won't you?"

"Yes, and so too," said the boy, "for Untie says you are purty, like them;" first kissing the flowers and then putting his cherry lips through the rails to meet those of Mabel.

The latter only laughed on hearing "Untie's" opinion of herself, and then asked the child his name.

"Horton Mackenzie, but mamma and untie call me Bobby, tans untie is Bobby an' I's like him," with another sniff at the roses.

"And where is papa?" asked Mabel, delighted with the tiny stranger.

"Oh! a lon' way away, such a lon' way," and he stretched out his baby arms as a simile of the distance, and doubtless would shortly have disclosed all the family affairs with which he was acquainted had not a lady made her appearance.

"Oh! look, mamma, look!" said the child, holding the roses to her; whilst bowing to the sisters, the former hoped he had not been troublesome. Then turning—

"You did not ask for these I hope, Bobby!" she said.

The boy lowered his head over his treasures, fearing they would be taken from him, declaring Bobby did.

"Dear little fellow, don't be angry with him," said Cecilia; "we are so glad through his agency, to have the pleasure of knowing you, and I am sure our mother will be delighted; it seems so odd for such near neighbours to be entire strangers."

But Mrs. Mackenzie made no reply which

could lead the girls to suppose she desired their friendship; whilst a look of pain passed over her beautiful countenance, and a sadness into her hazel eyes, when saying something about her brother's expected return, she bade them good day, re-entering Rose Villa, followed by her little son.

"A complete snub," said Mabel, who felt quite humiliated at the way her overtures of friendship had been received; and, with her sister, was about to re-enter the house, as the garden door adjoining turned on its hinges, and the brother appeared, when curiosity induced them to stay a few moments longer.

He raised his hat, as his eyes fell on the sisters; the face of the younger becoming red as the roses in her hand at the recollection of Bobby's communication.

"A beautiful day, ladies," he ventured; and would evidently have entered into a further conversation than the weather, had not a sign from the window prevented him, when with a half-uttered excuse that he was late, he moved on.

"What a shame," said Mabel, as he disappeared within. "And he seemed so nice, too; what made him leave so suddenly?"

"Why didn't you see Mrs. Mackenzie beckoning to him from the window?" asked Cecilia. "I wonder why she objects to make friends with us, it seems so extraordinary to do more than carry in their floral treasures, and prepare for the advent of their friends."

But their eyes appeared to own a peculiar fascination for Rose Villa; and when, after dinner, they ascended with their guests to the drawing-room, they could not avoid looking in that direction.

A one-horse brougham was waiting outside, and but a few moments elapsed when they saw Mrs. Mackenzie emerge from the former and enter the same; and little Bobby ran down the path to kiss his hand to his mother as she drove off.

CHAPTER III.

THE RETURN.

It was three months now since Mrs. Mackenzie had taken up her residence at Rose Villa, and the mystery surrounding her was as great as ever.

Each night the same carriage drove up at the same hour, and she was seen to drive off alone, not returning until after twelve o'clock; whilst after the first meeting, the girls saw no more of little Bobby, except when he went out, attended by his nurse.

"Who do you think is living next door, miss?" asked the housemaid of Thorn Villa, one day when she was dressing Mabel's golden hair.

"Who? What do you mean?" replied that young lady.

"Why, Clara, miss, as used to live with your ma; she's been there now close on a fortnight, but I never saw her till yesterday."

"And what did she say?" asked Mabel.

"That she couldn't make the place out. Mrs. Mackenzie, it seems, goes out every night about half past seven, and does not return till sometimes close on one, and then never goes to bed scarcely; sitting up all night and making her own breakfast with a spirit lamp, before anyone is up in the house."

"What nonsense, Ellen; she couldn't live without sleep. You mustn't believe all Clara says."

"Well, no, miss; but Clara says she sleeps for a few hours in the day, when she ties a handkerchief on the handle of her door as a sign she is not to be disturbed. And to hear the way she sobs sometimes it would make your heart bleed. And she has all kinds of disguises," added the girl, in a mysterious tone.

"All kinds of disguises!" Mabel ejaculated.

"Yes, miss; the ante-room at the end of the hall is her private room. And Clara says it is a sight, papers littered about, and such a lot of different wigs. Will you have your hair arranged

high on your head, miss." And with no further allusion to her former conversation, Ellen coiled round the glossy braids according to her mistress's directions.

But, as Ellen had said, the carriage was waiting at the entrance to Rose Villa when Mabel descended to the drawing room, where Cecilia and Mrs. Maunders were already.

"Yes, there she goes, mamma," said the latter, looking from the window, and Mabel saw the little black-robed figure of Mrs. Mackenzie walk down the gravel path.

But their attention was soon diverted from her further movements, a servant at that moment entering with a letter for the elder lady.

It was from Reggy, and the girls eagerly gathered round their mother to learn its contents.

It was headed Portsmouth, and the writer went on to say he should be at Thorn Villa almost as soon as they received it. "I am going to bring a friend with me, mother dear," it went on, "a right good fellow; I know you won't mind. He is ordered home on sick leave. We were quartered together at Madras, and when he told me of his return to England I persuaded him to visit me; for it appears that for some reason his family have cut him; but he has been very kind to me, and I have always found him a perfect gentleman."

"Shall we wait dinner, dears, a short time?" asked Mrs. Maunders, refolding the letter; and her daughters replying in the affirmative, directions were given that the same should be put back for another hour.

The allotted time, however, having elapsed, and cook becoming impatient, they were about to enter the dining-room when a hansom drove up from which two gentlemen alighted, and Reggy's well-known voice was heard in the hall.

"Well, and how is the dear old mater?" he asked, after having returned the embrace of his sisters, who had rushed out to meet him, for the moment entirely forgetting his companion. The latter, like himself, was much browned by the Indian sun, and although he was but thirty, the lines on his face were marked, not so much from the effects of the climate, as from a heavy trouble which seemed to have taken all the youth from his countenance, and for which he accounted by a plea of bad health.

"Excuse me, Horton," said Reggy; "allow me to introduce you to my sisters, and the dear mother here," and he released himself from the arms of the latter, in the joy of seeing whom, all else was forgotten, whilst his friend stood aloof, a spectator of the scene.

"Captain Archibald Horton," he added; and Mrs. Maunders held out a hand of welcome to the stranger, hoping a return to England would soon recruit his strength and health.

"Dinner is just served, Reggy," said his mother; "we waited an hour after receiving your letter, hoping you would have been here sooner."

"We came as fast as steam could bring us, and as I am almost famished, we will only stay to wash our hands, and will join you in five minutes. Come on, Horton," when flying up the stairs two at a time, Reggy led the stranger to his dressing-room.

In less than the five minutes they were back again to where the ladies awaited them, the gas was lighted, the early September days now beginning to shorten visibly.

Captain Horton had thrown off the melancholy which at his first appearance had invested him, amusing his hostess with an account of his adventures, whilst Reggy's spirits became almost boisterous in their exuberance.

"So Dunstable has secured a good tenant at last," he said, as Cecilia told him of the adjoining villa having been let, shortly after he left England; and then he turned to Captain Horton, who was deeply engaged cracking walnuts for his younger sister, telling him of the bad reputation which formerly existed regarding the same.

"And are they nice people?" he asked, referring to the present occupants.

"Well, you know as much concerning the

matter as we do," his mother replied; "the family consists of brother, sister, and little boy, son of the latter, but as we have not exchanged half-a-dozen words and see nothing of them further than their going in or out, we can say but very little."

"But who do you think is living there as parlourmaid, mamma?" asked Mabel.

"I am sure I cannot tell," Mrs. Maunders answered; "anyone I know!"

"Clara!"

"Clara!" ejaculated the former; "well, I only hope she will give them greater satisfaction than she did us. What assurance to be sure that girl has, to take service so near, after her behaviour here. But who told you, Mabel?"

"Ellen," was the reply, and then Mabel repeated the remainder of that young woman's communication.

"You make one feel quite inquisitive to have a glimpse at this mysterious party," said Horton; "is she young and pretty?"

"Very pretty, I think," said Cecilia, "and she can't be more than twenty-five, with fair hair and dark hazel eyes."

"Dread, I'll lay a wager—the hair, I mean," said Reggy.

"Well, we didn't suppose you meant her eyes, you uncharitable heathen," Mabel returned; "but I'll accept your wager, for I am sure it is nothing of the kind."

"Another of Dunstable's mysteries," laughed her brother; "but supposing we waive the point, and adjourn for a little music."

The ceremony of leaving the gentlemen to enjoy their wine and nuts was dispensed with on this occasion; after so long a time having passed since they had seen Reggy, they could not allow etiquette to interfere with the pleasure they experienced at having him once more among them.

Captain Horton had not said much, but since Mabel had given a description of their neighbour he seemed to be equally interested in obtaining a glimpse of this golden-haired goddess, although his observations were carried on in a style of accey which the girls could not understand; and if ever they detected him in the act of gazing from the drawing-room window in the direction of Rose Villa, he would start as though he had been guilty of some serious indiscretion.

As the weeks passed, the girls gradually grew shorter and shorter, and, further than the sound of the carriage wheels as they each evening drove up at the door of the villa, they had no further intimation of the movements of those within.

Captain Horton had been prevailed upon to extend his visit long beyond the appointed time; he had, by his quiet ways and gentlemanly demeanour, created a favourable impression on the minds of both mother and daughters; but further than that he was unassailable, neither the fair beauty and winsome ways of Mabel having more impression on him than the charms of her quiet, elder sister, whilst he was affable and most considerate to both.

"It is of no use the girls attempting to see their caps at him," Reggy told his mother. "I don't believe Venus herself would move him in the least."

"Do you know anything of his past life?" the lady asked, "and why it was his father has disowned him?"

"Well, when in Madras he had a serious illness—fever, and I, having taken a great liking to the fellow, often visited him. When in his delirium I learned something of his life's history, in which the name of Nina was prominent, and on his recovery he appeared most anxious to know what he had revealed during his wanderings."

"I told him most; when he told me he was a married man, that his wife had been a serious comic singer, and when it came to his father's ears, who had built his hopes on his becoming the husband of his cousin, he disowned him, declaring he was no longer a son of his, that in the future he would have nothing but his profession to give him a place in society."

"And his wife?" Mrs. Maunders asked.

"He did not tell me further about her than that they separated shortly after. But that

he loves her passionately, I gained not only from his ravings, but his assertion that no other woman would ever hold a place in his heart. 'But my history is a sad one, and full of horror,' he concluded. However, here he is, so don't let him suppose I have repeated, even to you, mother, what he confided to me in secrecy."

Captain Horton now entered the room. He was unusually pale, not a vestige of colour showing through his dark olive skin, whilst he appeared to be suffering from some sudden excitement.

"Are you not well, old fellow?" asked Reggy, struck with his strange appearance.

"Not very," was the reply; "but I am come to say, Mrs. Maunders," he continued, addressing the latter, "that I fear I shall be obliged to leave you to-morrow, though I shall never forget the kind hospitality I have received at your hands."

"It has been a great pleasure to have you with us, Captain Horton. I sincerely hope you have received no bad news to hasten your departure."

"A little matter of business," he returned, almost inaudibly, though Reggy could see his hands visibly shake whilst endeavouring to control his agitation, as the girls entered the room, and Mrs. Maunders communicated the intelligence to them.

CHAPTER IV.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

OCTOBER was at its close, but still the sun shone forth warm and pleasant, as though unwilling to pass away with the glow of the autumn.

Captain Horton was anxious to leave by an early train, Reggy determining to accompany him to the station; so with a hearty shake hands all round, hoping to see him at a future time, the former bid adieu to Mrs. Maunders and her daughters, and descended the steps leading to the gravel path, at the end of which a cab was awaiting him.

"Come on, old fellow, we shall be late," cried Reggy from the interior of the vehicle, from which he protruded his head to urge his friend to greater haste, when, to his astonishment, he saw the lady next door holding a tiny boy by the hand, eagerly watching their proceedings, whilst Horton seemed uncertain as to his future movements, and a look of intense agony passed over his features.

It was momentary, and then he joined the former, and they were about to drive off when a servant, with a letter in her hand, motioned to the cabman to stop.

It was Clara, and Reggy could not avoid an exclamation of surprise as she handed the missive to his companion, and then they were really off.

Horton appeared so entirely wrapt in his thoughts that the former, finding it useless to withdraw him from them, contented himself by also indulging in a reverie.

Surely, he thought, his friend had not formed a clandestine connection with the fair owner of Rose Villa—and it was excusable that he felt a keen curiosity respecting the letter which Clara had conveyed to him; but Horton made no comment whatever on the circumstance, placing it in his breast-pocket without even reading the superscription.

They were just in time for the train, not a moment to spare, so with a cordial good-bye Reggy saw his friend steam out of the station, when he returned to his mother's home.

The girls were alone, seemingly in a state of great excitement, as, shortly after, he and Captain Horton had driven off, Clara had run in from next door, imploring their mother to go to her mistress—she was so frightened, believing she was dying, and Mr. Melville, her brother, was away.

"But there is the doctor," said Mabel, looking from the window. "I suppose mamma will come in directly he has gone."

"Why, it must have been very sudden," said

Reggy. "Mrs. Mackenzie was in the front garden when Horton and I drove off."

"Yes; we saw her—but here comes mother," and Cecilia rushed to hear the news from her mother's lips.

"Poor thing, she is very ill—some sudden shock. Dr. Stone says she must be kept quiet for a few days, so I have promised to go back in a moment or two."

"But surely, mother dear, you are not going to nurse a perfect stranger!"

"No, Reggy," Mrs. Maunders replied. "The doctor is going to send a professional nurse, but she begged so hard that I would return, that it would be unchristian-like, to say the least, to refuse to do so. Poor young thing, she seems so unhappy!"

But a short time intervened before the former again entered the room where Mrs. Mackenzie lay. She had recovered consciousness, but there was a wild, glassy look in her eyes, which gave great uneasiness to those around her.

Their brother had returned, who was dumb-founded at the intelligence which awaited him—his sister's sudden indisposition in no less degree surprising him than did the presence of a neighbour who, in the space of nearly three months, they had never known.

Bobby had been taken screaming from his mother's side, and the latter, seeing her brother enter, motioned to him to approach, when, after uttering a few whispered words into his ear, he sent a telegram at once, according to her directions, and then, the nurse not having yet arrived, she was again alone with Mrs. Maunders.

The latter took the chair close to where she lay, holding the feverish hand she placed in hers, whilst she watched the restless movements of the golden head, and the bright light which glittered in her hazel eyes. All was very quiet around; and as, at last, they closed, Mrs. Maunders was in hopes that she had fallen asleep, while she still remained with her gaze fixed on the beautiful face of the sufferer.

But it was only for a few moments, when with a convulsive start she rose from her pillow.

"Take me away, take me away," she cried.

"Look, look, don't you see?"

"There is nothing, my child; you have been dreaming," and the former readjusted her pillows, soothingly replacing her head on the same.

"Perhaps I was. Don't let me go to sleep again," she pleaded; "it is always so then."

"What is always so?"

"The dreams," she returned; "it all comes back to me so vividly that I dread the nights; but you don't know, I forgot"—then after a few moments' silence, "you are very good to me," she continued, after which she remained quiet, until, as the hired nurse made her appearance, Mrs. Maunders rose to go.

Some days elapsed before she was able to leave her room, during which the latter had been a constant visitor at her bedside, often running away with Bobby to her own home to prevent his disturbing the invalid.

"Why is it that you are so anxious to get out?" Mrs. Maunders asked, when on one occasion Mrs. Mackenzie had been pressing her brother to order the brougham, as she felt sure she was quite able to go that evening.

"Don't you know," was the reply, "I am a professional?"

"A professional what?" asked Mrs. Maunders, not wholly understanding her meaning.

"A professional singer," she answered; "but perhaps you would think it a very dreadful thing to be a serio-comic?"

"I don't exactly comprehend," she replied, "but I think nothing dreadful by which you obtain a respectable living. Why should I?"

"I don't know," she said, her hazel eyes fixed on her friend's face; "but most people do; but I feel happier when I am in the Hall. Somehow, the excitement takes me out of myself, and I forget the past, whilst here I feel as if I should go mad."

"But what left that troubles you so?" Mrs. Maunders asked; "you are so young. Is it the absence of your husband?"

She made no answer, only working her restless

fingers in and out of the holes of the woollen wrap which encircled her shoulders, as though weighing in her mind whether and how much the former knew of her history, and then she asked,—

"Can you fancy, Mrs. Maunders, anyone marrying anyone they did not care for, whilst there was someone else whom they loved very dearly?"

"I should think such a case would only bring unhappiness. Is it yours? If so, I am very sorry for you; but were you forced into this loveless marriage!" and she looked steadfastly at the girl, who was still nervously toying with her shawl. "Did your parents—?"

"No, no," she responded, anticipating the question her companion was about to ask: "they are both dead—dead before I was old enough to know either. No one made me, it was only my own wickedness."

"And was he not kind to you, or is it the thought of the one you did love which makes you miserable?"

Mrs. Maunders watched her narrowly. What was it in this girl's life which made her youth sorrowful? What had her past been which wrought such horrors to her imagination. Was it a guilty secret which had separated her from the man she had married, the returning to the life from which, maybe, he had raised her? And a thought of her own innocent girls made her almost shudder, as she weighed in her mind what this woman—a singer at a music-hall—might have been.

The latter apparently read her thoughts, the tears starting to her eyes, as she fancied Mrs. Maunders shrank from her, when, with a sudden impulse, she threw herself at her feet.

"I know you think me all that is horrible," she said; "but I am not, dear Mrs. Maunders, indeed, indeed I am not. There is something terrible in my past, which, strive as I would, I can never forget; but it was not my doing. No, no, not that. I did marry, treading the love of my life beneath my feet, and stretching out my arms to the wealth, the position, that marriage brought me; but he was so good—my husband I mean—that in time a new love dawned in my existence. I had almost ceased to remember what I now looked upon as a foolish child's fancy (for I was but a child), when—"

Here a cold shiver ran through her frame; her eyes seemed to start at the horrors of that recollection, whilst convulsive sobs choked her utterance.

"Never mind, dear," Mrs. Maunders said, kindly; "wait till you are stronger, and you shall tell me all. Assure me, dearest, but of one thing, that there is nothing in your past which would render you an undesirable companion for my children, and I am satisfied."

"Before Heaven there is not," and as the former looked into her eyes she never doubted the truth of her assertion.

"But what makes you continue to follow your profession? Surely you have no need to do so now you are married! You are not a widow, are you?"

"No," was the reply; "but there is a reason which for the present compels me to do so. I will tell you all one day; but I hear Bobby's voice now, so good-bye, my dear, kind friend," and Mrs. Maunders kissed the uplifted face with as much affection as though it was that of her own Mabel.

CHAPTER V.

BACK AT PORTSMOUTH.

It was a very miserable journey that Captain Horton had after he had bid good-bye to Reggy at the station, and he was not sorry when he arrived at Portsmouth to at once proceed to his quarters, not caring to show himself amongst his brother officers for the rest of the evening.

The letter which had been delivered to him on his leaving Thorn Villa had been read and re-read until almost every word it contained was indelibly engraved on his memory; and yet, as he sat before the fire his servant had hastily lighted for him, in the enjoyment of dressing—

gown and slippers, he again withdrew it from his bosom.

"And am I never to be believed?" he read. "What is there left now which will convince you of my innocence? for before Heaven, Archie, I am innocent of the crime you lay to my charge. I know I sinned, deeply sinned in taking your name whilst my heart was another's; but I had outlived all that. It was yours then, only yours, and not only had I learnt to love you, but to be proud of the name on which I had never brought dishonour. I have renounced it now, have returned to my old life, for from you I could never take a penny whilst you look upon me as the lost creature that you do. The horrors of that day are ever before me, and were it not for that I should go mad. I have but one hope left, my faith in Providence, believing He has brought us together for some good purpose."

"NINA."

"Pshaw!" he said, as he again folded the paper, "she thinks to get over me like that, does she! Well, it serves me right for ever marrying her. What could I expect?" and Captain Horton took a cigar from his case, leisurely lighting the same, as a solace to his disturbed feelings.

"To think I should have been there close on three months, and without the least suspicion," he ruminated, whilst filling the air of his bar-room with clouds of smoke from his fragrant havannah. And then he removed it from his mouth, letting it nearly die out between his fingers, whilst his thoughts went back into the past.

What that past was no one knew, but an expression of sadness more than was his wont came over the soldier's face, and there was a moisture about the eyelids which evidently caused him annoyance.

"Bah!" he exclaimed, suddenly rousing himself, "what a fool I am, and she isn't worth it; and yet try as I would, I love her, my little girl, fondly as ever. What if, after all, I had made a mistake. But no, no, Archibald Horton, one cannot disbelieve the evidence of their own senses," and he again lit his weed, allowing his better feelings to evaporate in the smoke it created.

"Why, old fellow, I understood you had applied for an extension of leave, and that we stood no chance of seeing you one of us for some time to come! Wasn't it true?" and Lieutenant Agar looked rather curiously at Archie, when he showed himself on parade the next morning.

"It was my intention to have remained in town a few weeks longer," was the reply, "but I was called back rather unexpectedly, arriving too late last night to do anything more than go to bed."

Manvers, another young officer, now appeared on the scene, humming the tune of a popular music-hall song, which he stopped to finish before he was apparently aware of Horton's return.

"For Heaven's sake, Manvers! do let it rest!" said Agar, referring to the air he was singing. "I have heard nothing else since you came from London, until it will drive me to death, and you will have to sing it as a requiem over my coffin."

"Beg pardon!" rejoined the sub, laughing. "How are you, Horton? Better?" and he held out his hand to the latter.

"Has he been in town also?" asked Horton, as, after a few moments, Manvers left them to join a group of officers at a little distance.

"Yes, the young cad!" was the response. "And, it seems, has left his heart behind him; certainly lost his sense, if he ever had any!"

"What do you mean?"

"Fallen in love, my dear fellow, with a singer in a metropolitan music-hall—paint, powder and all!" and Lieutenant Agar, laughed at what he considered a good joke.

"What is her name?" asked Horton, a curiosity he could not suppress having taken possession of him.

"He did tell me. I forget, I am sure. Nina

something, the empress of song. But never mind that, come and have a glass of cognac. You look fit to faint!"

"Yes, I am afraid I shall have to fall back on the sick-list!" said the former, as linking his arm within that of his friend, he allowed him to conduct him to his rooms.

"What an idiot I was!" mused the latter, as later on, he ruminated over the sudden change which had come over Horton, when telling him of Manvers's fascination. "Of course, now I remember, his wife was something of the kind, and, they do say—"

But what they did say Lieutenant Agar had no time to think further of, being called away on some military duties at the moment, whilst Horton, depressed and miserable, sought to drive from his mind the effect which his friend's conversation had had on him.

He felt far too ill to leave his quarters for the remainder of the day, giving his servant strict injunctions to admit no one; the chatter of his friends would have jarred upon his senses, whilst he was totally unfit to enter into conversation with them.

"I cannot wear my heart on my sleeve," he said. "How strange Agar looked at me, too, when speaking of Manvers! Of course, he knew, to a certain extent, how the case applied to myself, and that was why he was so anxious to turn the subject. However, as we saw, so must we reap, and this is the fruits of my folly. Yes," he continued, unlocking a drawer, from which he took a daily paper, "here it is—Wednesday, January 20th, 1881. Three years since, and yet it seems but yesterday, that I entered my drawing-room, my wife's room, and then—"

But at this point Captain Horton's thoughts appeared too painful, for, burying his face in his hands, he apparently endeavoured by so doing to shut out a remembrance too painful to be recalled.

But after a short time he unfolded the former, turning to a certain paragraph headed, "Romantic Suicide."

This seemed to have a strange fascination for him, for he read and re-read it until, with a sigh almost approaching a groan, he again folded it up, and replaced it in the drawer.

"But I must see Manvers!" he said; "for I cannot rest until I have heard the truth of Agar's assertion! Nina," he said, "an assumed name, doubtless, and maybe even now I am torturing myself unnecessarily. However, I will invite this boy to my rooms, it will do no harm."

So, penning a hasty note, in which he trusted Mr. Manvers would give him the pleasure of his company after tea to smoke a cigar in his rooms, which he was not well enough to leave, he summoned his servant to deliver the same.

It was nearing ten o'clock when the young officer made his appearance. He was a beardless youth of not more than twenty, going by the name of "Baby" in the regiment, being treated much the same as if he were one by his comrades.

"Sorry to hear you are soedy, old fellow!" he said, taking Captain Horton's outstretched hand; "but India plays the deuce with a man, ruins your liver, and makes life scarcely worth living."

The latter smiled at Baby's speech, telling him to be seated, and that he thought it very good of him to visit him in his solitude.

"So you have been in town, Agar tells me," said Horton, after the brandy had been placed on the table and they were industriously filling the room with smoke.

"Yes," replied Baby; "a jolly place London. I only wish I had known where you were billeted, and I would have found you out."

"And where were you?" asked the other. "I wonder I never came across you."

"Oh! I was with the old folks, you know, at Malda Vale; had to escort my sisters here, there, and everywhere, and to use all the persuasive powers of which I was master to get the pater to allow me even a latherkey."

"But you succeeded in getting it, I conclude!" said the Captain.

"Rather!" returned Baby. "So in gratitude for the said indulgence I took the girls and the mother to most of the theatres, and myself to the music-halls afterwards."

"What, all?" asked Archie.

"Well, not exactly. I went to the Alhambra, the Pavilion wasn't opened, I wish it had been; but I liked the first immensely."

"Anything good?"

"Yes, about the usual; but there was one girl there, by Jove, she could sing! 'Twas a pity she didn't go in for something better. I went to see her whenever I had the chance."

Captain Horton knocked the ashes from his cigar, replenished his friend's glass, and then asked her name, apparently almost unconcerned as to the reply, whilst every nerve spoke of the excitement he was undergoing while awaiting the answer.

"Nina, the empress of song, they styled her. She was an immense favourite, as pretty and graceful as she was talented; but there was no chance of an introduction."

"No!"

And what an intensity of significance Captain Horton betrayed in his monosyllabic query.

"No," responded the boy; "she came and went, like a meteor. No one was ever known to address her, but in the most courteous tones, whilst the least advance she resented with the dignity of a queen."

Captain Horton drained his glass, swallowing with the liquid a compound of remorse, gladness, and mortification—a strange mixture, but it was that of his feelings. Love for a woman on the one hand, humiliated pride on the other for the name he had brought so low, and he was glad when Manvers changed the subject if not more so when, in the early hours of the morning, he at last bade him good-night, and left him to his own reflections.

It was in vain he attempted to sleep, try as he would the god of slumber was not to be courted; and not until his servant appeared in the morning did a drowsiness overcome him.

"A letter for you, Captain; will you have it there?" asked the latter, as he held the same towards his master.

It was from his father's solicitors, informing him of his death, which had taken place a week before.

Archibald was his heir, and notwithstanding that the former had never forgiven his son for the ignominy which he considered he had brought on an old and honourable name, still the estate being entailed, he could not deprive him of his inheritance; and so he found himself Sir Archibald Horton, though the man through whose death he became so never expressed a wish, even in his last moments, to be reconciled to his only son.

His mother, now that she was alone, would, he felt sure, no longer debar herself of the happiness of his society, for which she had so frequently yearned; whilst he felt as anxious to seek consolation from her loving presence as he did to console her in her great grief; so, giving speedy directions to his servant to pack what he required, he rose hastily, and was soon on his way to Singleton Hall, his late father's residence.

CHAPTER VI.

DOUBTS.

MRS MACKENZIE had fully recovered from the sudden attack which had so strangely seized her the day of Captain Horton's departure from Rose Villa, since which she and the Maunders' family had become quite friendly.

"I always thought she was an actress, or something of the kind," said Cedilie, when their mother had told them of the former's profession, which fully accounted for the wigs, &c., of which Clara had spoken. "But I always thought music-hall people were awfully *de trop*, mamma, while Mrs. Mackenzie appears a perfect lady."

"My dear child, there are actresses and actresses, and although I should be sorry that either of you should follow such a calling, still we must not look on all in the same light. Mrs. Mackenzie tells me she was an orphan, and when a very little child consigned to the care of an aunt, who was constantly reminding her of the dependent position she held, until her life became unbearable, and she determined, when

old enough, to run away. She did so when the time came, determining to earn her own livelihood. But, alas! she had been taught no business; she was not sufficiently accomplished for a governess, while her splendid voice was even untrained.

"She had come down to her last shilling, when, it appears, the landlady where she was staying, whose daughter was a professional, hearing her sing one day, advised her to try the stage. You know with what result. She had no influence to assist her in rising higher, and so she became a serio-comic."

"How dreadful!" said Cecilia, with a shrug of her shoulders. "I wonder her brother allows it!"

"He was away at the time; and although it is much against his wish that she still follows it, she is too proud to be a burden on him. I suppose her aunt taught her such a lesson of dependence that she will never forget."

"But what about her husband, mamma?" asked Mabel.

It was Mrs. Maunders' turn to shrug her shoulders now.

"That is the only question, my dear, which gives me uneasiness," was her reply. "These people have, unfortunately, such queer ideas, though I should be the last to think any harm of her; she seems so innocent and ladylike."

Cecilia was about to reply, when the door opened, and a tiny head, crowned with yellow curls, peeped in, followed by Mrs. Mackenzie herself.

"I hope you are not cross at my unceremonious intrusion," she said, advancing to where Mrs. Maunders sat by the fire, whilst she gave a friendly nod to the girls; "but we are going away next week, and I came to tell you all about it."

She looked very girlish and pretty in the close-fitting ulster and black velvet turban, from under which her golden hair showed to advantage.

"I am very sorry," said Mabel, the others joining in concert. "But it is very sudden, is it not?"

"Yes, it is, rather," she replied; "but I have accepted an engagement to go to America, and I shall be glad to do so now."

And Mrs. Maunders saw the tears start to her hazel eyes.

"Why now?" she was about to ask, but refrained from what might appear as inquisitiveness; but since the time she was so suddenly taken ill she had frequently noticed how restless she had become.

"Of course, Mrs. Mackenzie, we ought to be glad if it is for your good, but we shall be sorry to lose you just as we had begun to know each other better. Is your brother going with you?"

"No. Robert cannot leave his business, and I shall be back again in a few months," was the reply. "But I wish you would not call me Mrs. Mackenzie—you who have been like a mother to me!" and she threw her arms round Mrs. Maunders' neck, whilst she burst into tears.

"But I know no other name, my dear," the latter replied, kissing her affectionately.

"Nina," she said, "call me Nina;" and then, apologising for her tears, "excuse me," she continued, "but I am not very strong yet, so am going to take a rest until we—that is, Bobby and I—leave England."

She had recovered her self-possession now. Turning to the girls, who were amusing themselves with the latter,—

"I have an order for 'the Prince's,'" she said, taking the same from her purse, "if you can prevail on your brother to take you to see the *Pink Pearl*; it is very good. You see, it is for a private box, so you can all go."

"You are very kind," said Cecilia, "and we must get mamma to go with us. You will, won't you, dear?" (to her mother), "for Reggy is not at home."

"I suppose so, my child." Then, turning to their visitor, she continued, "My son was unexpectedly called away yesterday to visit a friend, Captain Horton, who was staying with

us a short time back, he having just lost his father."

Mrs. Mackenzie was deadly pale, so pale that it was impossible to escape the notice of her companions.

"Is anything the matter, dear?" Mrs. Maunders asked.

"No," was the reply, "but the name is familiar, that is all. But perhaps it is not the same family."

"Sir Frederick, the late baronet, resided at Singleton Hall, Suffolk, where Reggy is staying with Captain Horton, now Sir Archibald." But Mrs. Mackenzie's voice is scarcely audible as saying she did not know his parents. She made no further reply to Mrs. Maunders' communication, only adding it was getting late, and that the order was dated for that evening; she bid them all good-bye, leading Bobby very unwillingly from the room.

"Upon my word, I don't know what to think," said Mrs. Maunders, as the door closed behind their visitor. "What is your opinion, Cecilia?" referring to the former.

It was to Cecilia, being the senior sister, that Mrs. Maunders ever applied when in a dilemma, relying on what she considered her superior judgment.

"One is at a loss to know what to think, mamma," was the reply. "There is a mystery, no doubt. Did you see how white she turned when you mentioned Captain Horton's name?—and, if you remember, it was when he left us that she was taken ill. Besides—"

"Besides what, my dear?" asked her mother.

"Clara stopped the cab when he and Reggy were going to the station to give a letter to the captain," said Mabel.

"But you never told me this?" said Mrs. Maunders, reproachfully.

"No; because Reggy said it was better not," she replied.

Mrs. Maunders was much perplexed. She was most unwilling to believe any wrong of the girl for whom she had formed an affection almost equal to that bestowed on her own children, whilst these stubborn facts rose up so persistently against her that she almost began to regret the acquaintance which had sprung up between them.

"Why, you said the child's name was Horton, didn't you, Mabel?" she asked, presently.

"Certainly, mamma," was the reply. "But just look at the time. It's no use worrying about Mrs. Mackenzie. If we are going to the theatre we had better dress before dinner, so as to be ready to start directly after," and Mabel advanced to the door to carry out her proposal.

Mrs. Maunders felt unwilling to avail herself of her neighbour's kindness, but, being equally unwilling to disappoint her daughters, she cast aside any scruples she might have had, so followed their example by repairing at once to her dressing-room, though her kind, motherly soul was sadly troubled as to her future decision.

The evening's entertainment tended, in a great measure, to enable her to forget about her doubts respecting Mrs. Mackenzie.

Whilst there was no harm done, she thought afterwards she will be going away soon, and there would be no need to renew the acquaintance on her return.

But, notwithstanding, there was a certain coldness in her manner, which she could not hide from the former, whilst even the girls seemed to hold themselves aloof from her society; and Nina, seeing this, looked forward to her departure with a feeling almost akin to pleasure.

CHAPTER VII.

A NEW TROUBLE.

BUT few words had passed between the neighbours since the visit to the theatre, Mrs. Mackenzie's strange conduct having caused suspicions to arise, which were difficult to suppress, though, all the same, Mrs. Maunders could not reconcile the fact to her mind that there was a guilty secret in the keeping of the other.

That there was a secret in her life she was unwilling to divulge Nina had almost, if not quite,

admitted, the remembrance of which filled her with intense horror—a horror betrayed in the few hours of her delirium; and then there was the recollection of the excitement, which Mrs. Maunders had not failed to notice, under which Sir Archibald Horton suffered, when stating his intention of leaving Thorn Villa; and subsequently the agitation of Mrs. Mackenzie at the mention of that gentleman's name; all of which combined tended to excite most unpleasant feelings in the breast of the little woman, the harder to contend against that she had formed a sincere attachment for the unhappy girl, on the one hand, and yet, under the circumstances, she felt she was not doing her duty to her daughters by allowing them to form a questionable acquaintance, on the other.

In fact, she had fully made up her mind to bring matters to a crisis by questioning Nina on the subject, had they not arrived at that desirable state themselves, without her interference.

For days she had not seen the latter, also having missed the child, as he was accustomed to go out with his nurse for his usual walk.

The weather was lovely, which made it the more unaccountable; and she even began to blame herself, thinking she was in some way responsible for it all, when one morning she saw Dr. Stone's carriage at the garden-gate.

"I think someone must be ill next door," she said to the girls, who had also commented on Nina's non-appearance.

"I feel sure of it," answered Cecilia, "for I saw Dr. Stone's carriage there yesterday, too? I wish you would go in and see, mother dear; it seems so unkind!"

"So I will!" was the rejoinder, and Mrs. Maunders, merely staying to put a wrap over her head, emerged from her own door as the doctor's carriage drove off.

"Is Mrs. Mackenzie in?" she asked of Clara, who opened the door of Rose Villa.

"Yes'm, she is upstairs. If you will walk in here I will tell her."

And Mrs. Maunders was ushered into the drawing-room, where a gentleman was seated, evidently in great distress.

It was Nina's brother.

"Oh! I am so glad you have come in!" he said. "My sister is in great trouble! Poor little Bobby is very ill, having caught scarlet fever in some unaccountable way!"

"I am sorry! But why did you not let me know before?"

He lowered his eyes as he answered Mrs. Maunders' question.

"I really can't tell you, but Nina raised some objection, although I know she longed to have you with her all the time. But here she is," and as he spoke Mrs. Mackenzie entered the room.

All thoughts but of the sorrow which she was suffering passed from Mrs. Maunders' mind as she gazed on the girl before her, her pretty head bowed beneath its great grief, whilst the eyes she uplifted to hers were red and swollen, with great black rings, from weeping.

"Oh! he is ill, an ill, Mrs. Maunders," she cried, seizing the outstretched hands of that lady, and she burst into tears.

"We must hope for the best, dear," the other replied soothingly. "But why did you not ask me to come to you before? You could have sent Clara in."

"Yes, I know," was the reply; "but somehow I fancied you would not care to come to me. I thought—" but the words died on her lips.

"Well, never mind," and Mrs. Maunders considered herself the most unfeeling woman alive for her previous indifference. "I am here now, and perhaps, you are frightening yourself without a cause after all."

"I tell her the child will be all right again," the brother chimed in; but Nina only shook her head sadly.

"No, no," she says: "Dr. Stone says there is no hope. And, oh, Mrs. Maunders! he is all I have," and she buried her face in her hands, whilst convulsive sobs shook her frame.

"Come, come, you must not give way like that; while there's life there's hope, and doctors

are not infallible you know. Why, I have known children to outwit the cleverest." And thus, endeavouring to console her, Mrs. Maunders followed on to the child's room.

His little face was deeply flushed with fever, while his hands were hot and burning, but further than a moan of pain as he turned his head on the snowy pillow, he took no notice of their entry.

"Is poor little Bobby so ill?" and Mrs. Maunders advanced to where the tiny sufferer lay; but he merely raised his eyes to hers in apparent wonderment, evidently unconscious of those who stood around his bed.

"Yes, he is very ill, poor little fellow," she said; "but you must bear up, indeed you must, Nina," she continued, as Mrs. Mackenzie's sobs re-echoed through the room.

She waited some time, but no beam of recognition broke over the boy's countenance; and as at last he fell into a gentle sleep she moved from his side.

"I must go now," she said, "the girls will wonder what has happened; but I will run in again the first thing in the morning."

And the morning came, but with it no improvement in the case of the little invalid, who, his mother said, had not closed his eyes all night.

"Nor you either, I should think, by the look of you," was the rejoinder. "I am going to stay with him now, and you are just to lie down here and have a sleep, or I will run away at once," and, leading Nina to the sofa, Mrs. Maunders insisted on her having a rest, whilst she took up her station as watcher by the boy's bedside.

All seemed as quiet as though death himself had entered the apartment, the nurse walking in and out on tiptoe.

Mr. Robert had gone to the city, and there was not a sound to disturb the stillness, save disjointed phrases from the infant lips of little Bobby, as his baby mind wandered to other scenes in his tiny life.

Thoroughly exhausted, Nina had at last sobbed herself to sleep, only awakening when Dr. Stone's well-known knock resounded on the hall door, and that gentleman was shown into the room.

"Good-morning, Mrs. Maunders," he said, the same advancing to meet him. "Well, how is our little patient?" but his eyes encountering the white, sad face of Nina, "This will never do," he continued, without waiting for an answer. "I shall have to give you a good scolding."

But the tears only gushed afresh to her hazel eyes, around which had formed large rings of purple, when kindly pressing the cold hand she held out to him, he passed on to the couch of the sick boy.

There was a grave expression on his countenance as his fingers encircled the baby wrist, and placing his disengaged hand on the child's head he shook his own ominously.

And there stood Nina, her very life as though hanging on his words, her eyes flaring for that ray of hope he was unable to give, till as he rose to take his leave, she advanced and laid her hand upon his arm with such a world of anguish in her tone,—

"Oh! doctor, tell me, will he live?" she asked.

"My dear young lady, life and death are in the hands of Providence," he replied, solemnly, and then consigning her to the care of the nurse, he motioned to Mr. Maunders to follow him from the room.

"You give no hope, doctor; I see it in your face," the latter said, when the door closed behind them, and she followed him downstairs.

"It is impossible that he can live," was the reply; "he is sinking fast, and what I wanted to say was about the father. If he is within distance, don't you think it advisable he should be telegraphed for?"

"I believe he is abroad, but I will name the matter to Mrs. Mackenzie; poor thing, she is awfully upset."

"The very reason I would not mention it

myself," said the doctor; "you women understand one another so much better. Good-bye. I will call again in the evening," and shaking hands with Mrs. Maunders he left her to the painful task of informing the young mother how soon she would be called upon to part with her darling.

On her return to the sick room Nina rose from the kneeling position she had taken by her baby's bedside, and her grief welled out anew, as she read on her friend's countenance the dread sentence that her boy must die.

"I know," she cried, "I know what he has said. Oh! my darling! my darling! what shall I do! what shall I do!" and in a paroxysm of grief she again threw herself on the bed by her child's side.

"Hush, hush, Nina, you are only hastening the end," and again Mrs. Maunders gently led her away. "There is something I want to say to you, dear. Your husband, Nina; would you not wish him to see Bobby before he goes?"

For the moment Nina was carried away from her trouble by the question which so suddenly escaped her friend's lips.

"My husband!" she repeated. "Oh! I never told you how it was that we are parted. He thought me wicked, and would not believe me when I told him I was innocent; and I was, indeed I was. So then I left him, taking with me my one-year-old baby, after—"

and here a shudder passed over her frame.

"After what, dear?" Mrs. Maunders asked, kindly.

"The inquest," she replied.

"The inquest!" the former ejaculated.

"What do you mean, Nina?"

"Oh! Mrs. Maunders, it is a dreadful story, but Bobby is asleep now, and I will tell it you, after which you can telegraph if you think it best. You know how it was I adopted the stage as my profession, and how that I might gain wealth by a loveless marriage, I discarded it and a former lover for whom I had at that time an intense affection. But after a space my feelings changed, and I found myself as deeply devoted to my husband as he was to me, whilst the love of my girlhood became but as a dream in the past. Edward Milbourne went out of my life as completely as though he had never existed."

"We had been married now two years; my husband's regiment was quartered at Chatham, but according to his wish we still retained our residence in town, where I spent most of my time; when one evening, to my astonishment, a gentleman called, desiring particularly to see me."

"Not for a moment dreaming who it should be, he declining to send in his name, I told the servant to show him to the room where I was seated. Fancy my surprise when in my visitor I recognised the features of Edward Milbourne!"

"At last, Nina!" he exclaimed, his eyes flashing wildly as he witnessed the horror depicted on my countenance. 'I swore to have my revenge, for which I have waited two long years, and would have done so twenty but what I would have torn you from the man who stole you from me.'

"For the moment I could not answer him, as I stood paralysed, with an undefinable dread, but when I saw him turn the key in the door I recovered sufficiently to warn him if he did not unlock the same I would ring for assistance; but he only laughed, with his glittering eyes still fixed upon me, and when I made a movement towards the bell he sprang on me like the maniac he was."

"Oh! heavens! The agony of that moment! I dare not move; I could not scream. My tongue seemed to cleave to the roof of my mouth, and a wave of waters surged through my ears, as in a hideous nightmare I heard him speaking of the mad love he felt for me. And then there came a ponderous knock on the street door, after which I knew they were breaking in the one which divided them from Edward and me—then a flash, a report, and I knew no more."

"I recovered but too soon from the swoon into which I had fallen, when I would have thrown myself into the arms of my husband for protection—for it was he who had unexpectedly re-

turned—but he shrank from me, pointing to the lifeless body of Edward, which had fallen at my feet. At first I failed to realise my position, but when the fact dawned upon me that the former, discovering me locked in a room with a former lover, how everything spoke in my disfavour, I knew too well the reason of his coldness; and not caring to explain matters before servants, I raised no objection when he ordered my maid to assist me to my room; and without then foreseeing the extent of the misery in store for me, I turned from the terrible scene."

"I saw no more of him that evening, though I could hear him enter his room—after the tramping of strange feet and frequent slamming of doors had ceased below—and after a restless night I awoke with a sense of coming evil surrounding me."

"At last he entered my room, for I could not go down to breakfast, and the change that night's work had wrought on his face caused me to start when he came to my bedside to ask some necessary questions respecting the same."

"I told him all, but he would not listen to my protestations of innocence; in vain I implored him for our child's sake to hear me. He was deaf to my entreaties, telling me it was useless; he had had enough of scenes, that it was imperative we should attend the inquest, after which he should remain permanently with his regiment."

"A few days after I left, now three years since, my brother returning to England about that time; and although I knew where my husband was stationed I never saw him again until two days before he left your house."

"And he is!" Mrs. Maunders asked in surprise.

"Sir Archibald Horton," was the reply.

"My dear, he shall be telegraphed to immediately," said the former. "My poor child, I am so glad you have told me;" and affectionately kissing the grief-stricken girl, Mrs. Maunders bade her remain by Bobby, who was still sleeping, whilst she sought her brother.

But the door opening gently at this moment the latter entered, when with a hurried explanation from that lady, he stayed only to speak a few words of comfort to his sister, and give one look at the unconscious boy, when he hastened to send the desired telegram.

CHAPTER VIII.

BOBBY'S LAST WISH.

CAPTAIN HORTON was very glad to have his old friend with him, on his accession to his late father's title and estate, whilst Reggy had become as much a favourite with his widowed mother as with himself.

Dinner was over, the former having adjourned to the pretty drawing-room in Singleton Hall, which in summer-time looked out on a velvet sward of green grass extending to the river's bank beyond, with trees dotted here and there, extending the branches of their luxuriant foliage as a shelter for the sheep which fed beneath.

It was now looking very drear and miserable, the leaves whispering sadly to each other of the decay which awaited them, as they thickly covered the ground, where the herbage had become buried beneath their dead mates, scattered hither and thither by the autumn wind.

Within the Hall itself, around which the latter moaned very dimly, everything was comfort; a bright fire burnt in the steel grate, beside which Lady Horton had ensconced herself in an easy-chair, in full enjoyment of Ouida's last, whilst the gentlemen, having seated themselves before one just as cheerful in the smoking-room, consumed cigars with equal gusto.

It was but the second week in November, though the cold was as intense as in mid-winter, a sharp hear frost each morning covering the ground with pretty beads of ice, giving a thin veil of white to the green which peeped beneath.

"What on earth can this be!" said Archibald, a heavy double knock resounding on the front

door, as he was in the act of lighting a fresh cigar.

So seldom was the stillness disturbed around Singleton Hall after a certain time that he felt anxious respecting the cause, a sense even of something being amiss coming over him at the unusual occurrence as, with bated breath, he waited the entry of the servant, whose step was even now heard advancing to the door.

"A telegram, Sir Archibald."

He held out his hand, excitedly lifting the yellow paper from the silver salver presented to him, hastily tearing open the same before the former had scarcely left the room, and Reggy, could see his hand shake perceptibly as he read the missive.

"Read that! I must be off at once!" he said, when he had finished, throwing the telegram over to the latter, and he made a movement towards the hall, when the other prevented him.

"Wait a moment," Reggy said, reading the paper, "what does it all mean! From my mother to you,—'Come at once! Child dying! Lose not a moment!'"

"I can't stay to tell you now!" was the response, and Sir Archibald impatiently rang the bell; "It is a matter of life and death!" But seeing a hurt expression pass over his friend's countenance, "Pardon me," he said, "it is my child who is dying! Will you come with me, Reggy?"

"Yes," replied the latter, "with pleasure! But where are we going to—London?"

"To London! To Rose Villa! To my wife!" "I am in as great a fog as ever," said Reggy, when, on a servant entering, his host gave directions that the dog-cart should be made ready and brought round without a moment's delay, so as to be in time for the last train from Lowestoft.

"You know Mrs. Mackenzie!" he said, as the door closed. "It is not her right name, it is Horton! I am her husband!"

For the moment Reggy was so lost in astonishment, that he again called forth the impatience of the other, who kept urging him to hasten his preparations, or they would be too late.

So he had to control his desire to ask further questions, weighing events in his mind during the few moments Sir Archibald went to inform his lady-mother of his hasty departure.

"And are you going too, Captain Maunders!" she asked, when, on following her son to the hall, her eyes fell on Reggy, in readiness for the journey.

"Yes, Lady Horton; but I trust we shall soon be back again!" and he cordially shook her extended hand, not venturing to say more, as he was in ignorance regarding the extent of confidence between mother and son, a proceeding he had reason to be thankful for after, when his companion informed him that she was in ignorance of his marriage.

Scarcely a word passed between the two, as Sir Archibald urged on his horse to its greatest speed, and they rushed like the wind through the growing darkness and the nipping frost, until, alighting at the station, they hastened to procure their tickets, and then entered the London train, which was on the point of starting.

Mrs. Maunders had retired to obtain a little rest, leaving Cecilia and Mabel with Nina (whom no persuasion could prevail upon to leave her child's side), under the promise that she was to be awake as soon as Sir Archibald arrived.

Of course their mother had communicated to them the relationship which existed between their neighbour and the latter, and no less anxious were they than Nina herself, as doubts arose in their minds whether he would appear on the scene or no.

Mabel had been the previous day to Covent-garden to purchase a few flowers, for Bobby in his lucid moments had so prayed for some "pretty flowers" like those she gave him from her own rose-trees, and she was holding these to the child that he might enjoy their fragrance and feast his eyes on their transient beauty, when a double knock resounded on the street door, and a few moments later Sir Archibald entered the sick-room, accompanied by Mrs. Maunders, who was already up and prepared to receive him.

"Go down to your brother, my dear," said

the latter to her daughters, feeling that Nina's meeting with her husband should be unwitnessed by others; but the child clung so to Mabel that she was forced to remain, Cecilia alone, after having shaken hands with Sir Archibald, descending to the drawing-room, where Reggy was.

At first there was a pause, Nina still sobbing by the boy's bedside; whilst, with a world of remorse and tenderness in his tones, her husband called her by her name.

At the sound of his voice, the remembrance of which had been so dear to her in those long years of their estrangement, she arose from her kneeling posture; and as she saw his eyes, in their great sadness, dwell upon her own, she felt he was as anxious to take her to his bosom as she was to throw herself on his loving care and protection.

"Mrs. Maunders has told me all, darling! Can you forgive me, Nina?" he asked.

And then he opened his arms that they might encircle her in the love which had slumbered but never died.

For a few moments even little Bobby was forgotten, as, with her golden head resting on his broad shoulder, she rejoiced in her new-born happiness. And then she led him close to where their boy lay, his brown eyes gazing wonderingly on the scene before him.

"Here is papa come to see Bobby," and Nina raised him so that he could the easier meet his father's face.

"No, no, my papa is away, a long way away," he answered. "Bobby don't like that papa," and he turned from him to where Mabel still remained with the flowers he loved so well.

"Don't grieve, Nina," said Sir Archibald, noticing the expression of pain which passed over her countenance at the child's reluctance to admit of his caresses. "You must remember that he never knew me, and I am now only meeting with my just reward," whilst Mabel was unable to restrain her grief as she answered the questions of the dying boy.

"It is all nice there, Bobby," she said: "and God dearly loves little children."

"And He will love me?"

"Yes, darling, love you!" and the tears coursed each other down her cheeks, whilst Nina and her husband watched for what was so soon to follow.

They both knew too well that the baby-life was quickly ebbing away; the dews of death already stood upon the infant brow, whilst his breath became more difficult to draw. But after resting awhile the tiny hands still clasping the roses, a sudden thought appeared to take possession of his childish fancy.

"Where is uncle?" he asked.

"Uncle is asleep," his mother replied.

"Bobby wants to see him; tell uncle Bobby wants him so."

And Robert a few moments later entered the room, Mrs. Maunders having aroused him from the short sleep which fatigue had thrown him into.

"Is he worse?" he asked.

And Nina answering in the affirmative, he advanced close to the little bed on which his tiny nephew lay; whilst Mabel still remained on the other side.

"Does Bobby want uncle?" he asked, bending over the wee form.

"Yes; Bobby is doin' away," he answered, "and wants 'oo to love her as Bobby loves her," and lifting the hand of the former, he placed it on Mabel's. "It's so sleepy," he added. "Tell Bobbie 'oo will before he does to sleep."

One look at Mabel, who had bent her head, blushing over the baby's bed, and then, in a broken whisper,—

"May I?" he asked.

But she did not withdraw the hand Bobby had placed within his own, and the child, apparently satisfied, softly closed his pretty eyes, when, disengaging herself from his hold, Mabel pressed a kiss upon his cold forehead, leaving him in the few short moments which remained to his sorrowing parents, whilst she and Robert joined Cecilia and her brother.

Mrs. Maunders yet remained. They all knew

the end was at hand, when once again opening his eyes, already dim with the gaze of death, Bobby entwined his tiny arms around his mother's neck; and when he relaxed his hold his spirit had flown.

"It is all over, darling."

It was Sir Archibald who thus spoke, Nina, like one paralyzed, still remaining by her baby's side, unable to realise the truth that he was gone from her for ever; but the sound of her husband's voice—that voice for which she had hungered so long—recalled her to herself, when, with a last passionate kiss on the cold clay, she allowed him to lead her from the room; and Mrs. Maunders closed the eyes of her dead darling.

CHAPTER IX.

DARKNESS BEFORE THE DAWN.

WHAT followed after the death of Bobby was as a dream to Nina, who herself tottered for weeks on the brink of the great eternity; and it was not until Dr. Stone had pronounced her out of danger that Sir Archibald could be prevailed upon to leave the house.

Reggy had addressed a letter to Lady Horton at his request, saying that important business still detained him in town, but he would be back in Suffolk as soon as circumstances would admit of his taking such a step, when he hoped to give her an agreeable surprise.

Naturally she was anxious to know what it could be that kept him so long from Singleton Hall. She saw by the *Gazette* that he had sent in his resignation; and as it was her wish that he should quit the service, she at last considered that that must be the surprise to which he referred, congratulating herself that she would have him with her in her declining years.

"Oh! Archie, you look so worn. Do go out for a day; the air will do you so much good; and to-morrow I am going to ask Dr. Stone if I cannot take a drive, too," and Nina passed her transparent hand over the thin face of her husband, who seated by the couch on which she lay, seemed so unwilling to leave her side.

"Yes. I want you to pass your opinion on something I am having done, Horton, so if you have nowhere better to go you may as well go with me as far as the Euston-road, for I quite agree with my sister, an outing would do you good."

"I wish you would let me go too, or are you horrid men bent on secret service!"

And Mabel, who was arranging some flowers on the centre table, advanced to her lover's side, for she and Robert were lovers now, the former having made her promise that when Sir Archibald should take his wife from Rose Villa she would enter as his mistress.

"No, we are not going on secret service, Miss Impertinence," was the laughing rejoinder, "so if you like to come—for I know Nina will be

ST. JACOBS OIL POSITIVELY CURES SCIATICA AND RHEUMATISM.

MR. G. FLANDERS, of 4, Shepherd's Place, Upper Kensington Lane, London, S.W., stated to our representative:—

"Having suffered severely for a number of years from sciatica and rheumatism, and being quite unable to obtain relief from doctors and medicines, I was advised by a friend, who himself had received great benefit from the remedy, to apply St. Jacobs Oil, which I did. The first few rubbings eased the pain and stiffness wonderfully, and by the time the contents of the first bottle was used I was quite cured. I cannot speak too highly of St. Jacobs Oil, and will recommend it whenever I have an opportunity."



perfectly safe with your mother and Ossy—why, we shall be very glad to have your ladyship's society, shan't we, Horton?"

"Certainly," replied the latter, stooping to impress a kiss on the lips of his wife. "I am ready."

It was a lovely day, the sun coming out warm as Jane, causing the beads of hoar frost which sparkled on tree and shrub to disappear beneath its rays, when entering one of the trains they proceeded to their destination. Mabel all the time very anxious to know the purport of Robert's business, a point on which the latter was very reticent, enjoying the meanwhile the curiosity evinced by that young lady.

But she had not long to wait in suspense, as on alighting at the Euston-road, Robert led them without delay to one of the many stonemasons abounding in that locality, under the promise that they would not reveal to Nina the object of their visit, he wishing to surprise her on the morrow, when the stone they were about to inspect would be transferred to its permanent position; and then he bid them follow to where a man, evidently foreman of the works, advanced to meet them.

"Is it completed, Swanson?" he asked, as the latter touched his hat.

"Yes, sir," was the reply; "and I think you'll agree with me it's a downright little beauty!" And, following in his steps, they entered a shop, in which was a pure white marble cross, around which roses and lilies were wreathed, being exquisitely carved in the same spotless stone, whilst in gilt letters was engraved the words:—

"Sacred to the Memory of Horton Hilton Horton, only son of Sir Archibald and Lady Horton, who died November the 27th, 1885. Aged four years."

"Oh! Robert, it is lovely!" said Mabel, her pretty eyes filling with tears, whilst even Sir Archibald's became dim as he gazed on the memorial stone of his boy, and something like a sigh escaped him, when with his friends he retraced his steps.

(Continued on page 88.)

DOLLY'S LEGACY.

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CHAPTER II.

JOHN DEVEREUX and Madeline Charteris seemed as unvisited to each other as they possibly could be. Even society itself had been surprised to hear of their engagement; but the Countess Charteris and Lady Desmond were sisters, and almost from the birth of Madeline, it had been a pet scheme of the two mothers to marry her to her cousin.

Her mother died before she was in her teens; her father was in India; and so it came about that he never heard the scandals that made Viscount Devereux's name notorious; and when he came home to England and saw his daughter in all the budding beauty of seventeen he thought it the most natural thing in the world that her cousin should be over head and ears in love with her.

Madeline went up to her own room and rang for her maid. Her dark hair was soon coiled afresh, and her velvet costume exchanged for an elegant pink cashmere, trimmed with lace.

The attendant retired, and the young heiress turned for a moment to look at her own fair image in the glass.

She was very pretty. Bright eyes, soft silky hair, a clear fresh colour, and frank, open features.

Madeline knew she was fair to see, but she knew also she had not a tithe of the beauty of the young girl she had seen just now singing in the streets.

"Jack must love me very much to think me prettier than her," and Madeline gave a little half-sigh. "Sometimes I wish he didn't care quite so much; he is always worrying about being married, and I should like to stay just as

I am for ages. It is so nice, now papa has come home! When I was down at Field Royal with aunt Matilda I think I rather liked the idea of being married, because it would take me away from her, but now papa has come home I feel quite different. How odd it is!" and she shivered slightly. "How glad I am I have not got to earn money by singing in the streets! Poor girl! I wish I had gone to her and comforted her; she was so pretty and so young! I don't believe she was a day older than I am."

She little guessed the scene that had taken place almost before she was half within the shelter of her own room.

Jack, her own Jack, whom she often reproached herself for not loving as he did her, had stolen noiselessly from his uncle's house, and advanced stealthily to the side of the beautiful singer.

"I thought you would not escape me," he said, in a low, hissing tone. "Ah, my pretty wild bird, you had better not tire your wings by useless flutterings. Smile on one who is ready to adore you, and—"

He was interrupted. The girl raised one of her hands, white and small as Madeline's own, and deliberately struck him!

"Leave me in peace," she said, indignantly, "if you have any generosity in your nature!"

He scowled for a moment at her; then his face resumed its cruel, false smile.

"I am quite willing to follow the maxim of religious people, and return good for evil. A kiss for a blow is, I think, the proper phrase."

He had come nearer to her, so near that his hot breath touched her cheek, when a close brougham stopped at his uncle's house. Jack started. Another moment and the Earl of Charteris would descend and witness his daughter's fiancé's honourable compulsion. Viscount Devereux retreated promptly.

"We shall meet again," he said slowly. "You will not always shun me. I will conquer the hatred shining in your eyes. Remember, I have sworn it, and I never yet failed in aught I undertook!"

Dolly trembled. She was too thankful for her present escape to think of the future. The instant his hand had released her arm she turned down a narrow by-street, and not till she was out of sight of Lord Devereux did she even stop to look at the shining coin Lady Madeline had thrown her.

It was half-a-sovereign.

"How pretty she was!" thought Dolly; "and how beautiful her dress looked! I suppose she lives in that grand house. Oh, dear! how I wish I had been born rich, with plenty of money and kind friends!"

She stopped herself abruptly. She remembered she had a mother. Had she been slighting that patient, devoted mother by her wish? Had she seemed to despise her faithful love? The girl's generous heart smote her with a keen pang.

She did not attempt another song. She walked quietly back to her mother.

Mrs. Ford's little servant was standing on the steps. The moment she caught sight of her face Dolly knew there was something wrong.

She tried to speak, but the question she would fain have asked stuck in her throat, and she could only rush on as fast as her trembling feet would carry her to the room where her mother lay.

There was a change in the patient; now Dolly could see that, but she thought it a change for the better. Mrs. Smith seemed so much calmer. The wild, delirious look had died out of her eyes; she looked just her old self, only being worn and weak.

"Speak to her," said Mrs. Ford, in a low voice. "She has been asking for you this half-hour."

"Mother—oh, mother!"

The face brightened, the thin lips tried to smile even in their death-agony at that loved voice.

"Dolly, I'm going away."

The girl understood too well what she meant.

"Not yet, mother," pleaded Dolly; "not yet. You'd never go without me, and leave me all alone."

Mrs. Smith trembled.

"I'd stay longer if I could. It's a hard, rough world, my sweet one, and there's much sorrow before your tender feet. Tell me, Dolly, would you like to be rich?"

It was a strange question to ask upon her deathbed—strange inquiry to come from the lips of a woman so poor the parish might have to bury her; but evidently she wanted it answered.

"I think so," said Dolly, faintly; "if you were with me—not without. Riches couldn't make me happy alone."

Mrs. Smith sighed.

"Maybe I've been mistaken," she said, faintly. "When I'm cold and dead you may hear strange things of me; but, my child, I did it for the best. You might have been rich. I made you poor; but it was all from love."

Dolly kissed her. She quite believed her mother's mind was wandering.

"I shall see your father up there," went on Mrs. Smith, feebly. "After all, he was the one I wronged the most; but I think he'll forgive me."

"Surely," said Dolly, trying to comfort her.

"And, my darling, promise me two things. I can't die easily, Dolly, unless I have your word."

"I will promise."

"Never make a friend of a Devereux."

Dolly started. Coming as it did after her meeting with the Viscount this charge impressed her strangely. Could a kind of second sight have been vouchsafed to her mother? Could she possibly know of what had taken place only that evening?

"They are false—every one! They brought great misery on your father and mother. They would bring the same on you."

"I am not likely to meet them, mother dear."

"You will meet them," said Mrs. Smith, positively, clasping her thin hands; "something tells me so. It may be impossible to help seeing them; but, Dolly, never trust them. When their words are kindest fear them most!"

Dorothea began to think that illness had turned her mother's brain, but there was no resisting the entreaty of those fast-glancing eyes, and she gave the promise solemnly.

"I am almost happy now," said Mrs. Smith.

"One thing more, and I can meet your father."

She took from under her pillow the shabby discoloured egg which had so long been Dorothea's aversion. Throughout her illness this treasure had never been beyond her reach. Mrs. Ford had thought her devotion to it the worst sign of her illness until Dolly told her that ever since she could recollect her mother had set the same store by that egg.

"You see this!"

"Yes," breathed Dolly.

"It was your father's first gift to your mother. Remember, it was her legacy to you. Promise me, child, as you love me, never to part from it."

Ten minutes later all was over. Dolly was doubly an orphan, and sat in the gloomy parlour, weeping as though her very heart would break. It was not three weeks since the night she had walked so cheerfully down R-gent-street, and, oh! what an avalanche of trouble seemed to have come to her!

Three weeks ago she had been poor, certainly, but she had possessed a comfortable if humble home, and a mother to stand between her and the world's cold frowns. She had been in a fair way ere long to earn a sufficient living. Now she was homeless, friendless!

She could never return to Madame Marguerite's, because (this hurt her most of all—oh, how she blushed to recall it!) her mother had removed her from there by falsehood. No other dressmaker would take her without a reference. There seemed nothing before her but starvation.

One memory would come to her that New Year's night as she sat alone in her misery—the kind stranger who had come to her rescue in R-gent-street, and promised to call and talk over the future with her mother.

Oh! if he had only been allowed to come! He seemed so good and true, so brave and

generous! He would surely have given her his help in this bitter need.

But Dolly could not write to him—she did not even know his name. She might have gone to Elizabeth-street and left her present address, should he call; but a nameless something held her back.

Her mother's last thought had been to hide her from the discovery even of this friend. She might be said to have caught her death by doing so. Dolly could not make her sacrifice of no effect.

"What are your future plans?"

It was the doctor who asked her this question the day after her mother's death.

He had daughters of his own at home, and he spoke very kindly and quietly to the lonely orphan.

"I don't know, sir."

"Have you no friends?"

She shook her head.

"And no money?"

"I think there will be enough for the expenses," she said, nervously. "Mother had some fine old lace, and Mrs. Ford is going to sell it for me."

Dr. Pemberton rather doubted not Mrs. Ford's honesty and goodwill, but her ability. He knew that she would find it very difficult to gain access to the style of customer rich enough to buy old lace.

"I think we might help you in that, if you like to call and see my wife. She may be able to find you a purchaser. It is soon for you to go out, after your loss," he said, feelingly; "but Mrs. Pemberton cannot come to you in this bitter wind. She is a great invalid, and rarely leaves the house in winter."

"I suppose I had better go," said Dolly, when she and Mrs. Ford were left alone; "but, oh! I dread it! I never can talk to strangers, and now it will be worse than ever!"

"You won't mind talking to Mrs. Pemberton, dear, she is so kind. Yes, I think you had better go to-day."

CHAPTER III.

DR. PEMBERTON was not a fashionable physician. He had a large and lucrative practice; but as he never could bring himself to treat fine ladies as invalids when there was nothing the matter with them but *causit*, his patients were chiefly in the class who are ill because they can't help it.

But he was a man of large private means, and his wife's relations were very aristocratic people, therefore it will be seen Mrs. Pemberton was far more likely to be able to forward Dolly's wishes than her humble landlady.

"Will you come into the drawing-room? Mistress is at home," was the greeting Dolly received from the trim page who opened the door to her, when he had looked at the card, with a few words scribbled in the doctor's hand, which was Dolly's introduction.

From her childhood Dolly had never spoken to a lady, a real lady, as she would have phrased it. Certainly now and then at Madame Marguerite's she had been privileged to behold such favoured mortals, when they came to give their orders to the fashionable *modiste*; she had even two or three times been honoured by admission to the fitting-room, to hold the pins for the experienced "frier on;" but still the fact remained, she had never yet been inside a lady's house, or spoken to a gentleman.

She followed the page in silent suspense down the long corridor to a recess, where velvet curtains were closely drawn; he pushed these aside, opened a door, and ushered Dolly into an apartment, whose temperature made her think it was August instead of January.

It was the loveliest room she had ever entered. Yet there was nothing overwhelming in its splendour. It was emphatically a room to be used, and that people dally with in. You could move in it without fear of doing damage, and might even employ yourself without feeling you were taking a liberty.

It was of moderate size, and carpeted in velvet

pile; the furniture was in ebony and myrtle green velvet, but to alleviate the sombre hue of this, there were quantities of lace curtains and antimacassars, and a thick white fleecy hearthrug, a piano, a harp, a small writing-table, a well-filled book-case. All gave evidence that the apartment was not only for show.

A very slight, elegant-looking woman rose from a low chair by the fire, and came forward to meet Dolly.

"I think you must be Miss Smith," she said, taking the orphan's hand, and placing her a seat near her own. "My husband said I was to expect you."

"Yes."

Poor Dolly, she had never felt more shy and nervous. She longed to speak gratefully, but she could not.

Isola Pemberton understood, her eyes had read the girl pretty thoroughly, and she knew she was sad, not sullen.

"I wish I could have come to you," she said, gently. "Both my daughters are away, or I would have sent them to you. Let me look at the lace."

It was lovely old point, and had probably once adorned a dress. There was a quantity of it, and it was in perfect condition.

Isola thought she had never seen any finer.

"My dear," she said, kindly, "do you know this is very valuable?"

"I thought so. Mother earned our living by mending lace. Once, when things were very bad, she offered this to the shop she worked for, but they would only give ten pounds, and she thought it was worth more."

"It is worth fifty pounds, at the very least!"

Dolly clasped her hands.

"If I could only sell it soon!" she said, with a little sob; "so that it was in time for—"

Mrs. Pemberton knew what she meant. Her husband had guessed the idea of a pauper funeral was wringing the girl's heart.

"You need have no fear of that; we will advance you the money for the lace if it has not met with a customer by to-morrow."

"But—"

"We shall be no losers," said Mrs. Pemberton, gently. "I know several people who would be delighted to purchase lace like this. I wish I could help you in other ways, Miss Smith; you are so young to be left alone."

"I am seventeen."

"The doctor says you have no relations."

"No, I must earn my own living," and Dolly gave a weary little sigh. "I don't mind that, only—"

"Only you feel lonely!"

"That is just it!" and the girl's eyes filled.

"However I get on now it must all be for myself. I can never make mother pleased or happy."

"You have not thought of your plans at all!"

"Yes," said Dolly, simply; "I was awake all night, and I kept thinking. I don't want to leave Mrs. Ford. If I could only get needle-work I shouldn't mind how long I sat at it, so that I earned just enough to keep myself."

Mrs. Pemberton looked at her and sighed.

"I don't think that would answer."

"I can work very quickly."

"Yes; but you are very young and pretty. London is not the right place for you now you have no mother. My dear child, you ought to go into some family, where you would be safe and cared for."

Dolly shuddered.

"I couldn't go to service!" she said, faintly; "I think the thought of it would kill me!"

"I never dreamed of such a thing!" said Mrs. Pemberton, quickly; "indeed, it never entered my thoughts."

"And I am not clever," went on Dolly; "I never went to school in my life."

Mrs. Pemberton looked thoughtful.

"I know of one situation I think you might fill; the salary is not large, but the duties are light, and you would have a comfortable home in the country."

A faint flush of pleasure came to the girl's pale cheeks.

"Mother used to talk of the country once," she said, quickly; "she lived there. She was always wishing I could see it, if only for a day."

"You would live all the year round in a beautiful country house," went on Mrs. Pemberton; "you would have rooms to yourself, and plenty of time to improve yourself; and your duties would be the care and companionship of a little crippled girl."

"Children always like me," said Dolly, cheerfully, "and I am very fond of them."

"Mabel is eleven or twelve, I forget which. She has to lie on the sofa a great part of each day. Her elder sisters are grown up, and busy with gaieties; the younger ones are at school. It is a dull life for any child, especially one with such an affliction. Her mother has written to ask me to find her a suitable person, half-governess, half-companion, to go down at once. She only offers twenty pounds a year, which is the reason the situation is still unfilled."

They were interrupted; the page announced Lady Madeline Charteris.

Dolly would have withdrawn, but Mrs. Pemberton signed to her to remain.

Another moment, and she felt herself blushing to her finger-tips.

This young patrician beauty, in her velvet and furs, was the benefactress who last night had flung her that golden coin.

For one instant Dolly wished the ground would open and swallow her up; then she sat quite still, and felt able to bear even recognition, for she had done no wrong. There was nothing to be ashamed of in having sung for money to help her dying mother.

Madeline did not recognise her. Dolly in Mrs. Ford's bonnet and heavy shawl (put on because the widow wished her friend to appear in mourning) was a very different Dolly from the songstress. The girl in the streets had worn a small hat, showing her small, mobile face; this Dolly had a thick *cr pe* veil. She had lowered it just as Madeline entered, and so if the young heiress had looked at her at all she would have deemed her a depressed-looking widow.

"Cousin Isola," began the girl, as soon as she was seated, "I had a letter from Aunt Matilda this morning, and she wants to know when you are going to send her someone for Mabel."

"As soon as I can, Madeline; it is only a fortnight since she wrote."

"But she wants to go to Paris almost directly to meet the girls, and uncle won't have Mabel left alone."

"Aren't you going down to Field Royal, Madeline?"

"Oh no," and Lady Madeline blushed. "Papa says he can't spare me."

"I suppose he will have to spare you altogether soon now?"

"Nothing is settled."

"I thought Lord Devereux was such an impatient lover! The last time I saw him he talked of Easter for the wedding."

"Jack is fond of being in a hurry," said Madeline. "I am quite happy as I am."

Perhaps she remembered someone else was present, for she began to talk of indifferent matters. She barely stayed ten minutes in all, and she did not again allude to her engagement.

"Lady Madeline is the niece of my friend, Lady Desmond," said Mrs. Pemberton. "I detained you because I thought she might have some message from the Countess. Really, Miss Smith, I think the situation would suit you. I have heard enough of your tenderness to your mother in her illness to be sure you would be patient with an invalid. If you like, I will write to Lady Desmond, and say I have engaged you."

"I have no references."

Oh! how her voice trembled as she made the confession! It went to Mrs. Pemberton's heart. She was silent just a minute, then she said, kindly,—

"If you have never been from home, and have no friends, I do not see how we can expect references. I think Dr. Pemberton's recommendation will be all-sufficient, so I shall write, and tell Lady Desmond to expect you in a fortnight."

And, as Dolly walked briskly home, the greatest relief she experienced was the thought

that in a fortnight she would be safe from the molestations of that objectionable young nobleman, Viscount Devereux.

Field Royal had altered very much since the days of the Countess Viola. In his youth, the present Earl had been far more popular than his late brother; but after Viola's death the neighbourhood seemed to take up the idea he and his wife were not blameless in the matter, and shunned them pretty thoroughly until they came into the title.

Even then the new Lord Desmond was poor for his position; he had just one-third of his predecessor's income, and a large family. It was difficult for him to entertain his neighbours as his ancestors had done. So Field Royal gradually lost its character as the most hospitable house in Northshire. The Desmonds received visitors and returned them, but their position as leaders of festivities had gone for ever.

One by one the old servants had been dismissed until only the housekeeper remained, and she was kept, people said, because, having a handsome annuity from the late Earl, she required no salary from his brother's wife.

Mrs. Bond was a good, motherly soul. She had never taken kindly to her present mistress, but she clung with a sort of feudal attachment to the family. She had served so long, and tried hard, since she could not like their mother, at least to be fond of the children. It was hard work, but in one case she had succeeded easily—little Lady Mabel was dear to her as her own child.

Lady Mabel had not always been a cripple. Till she was five years old she was a smart, healthy child. Then came the accident, which made her lame for life; and then, seeing she never could be as other children were, her mother's love forsook her, and the Countess hated her—hated her so much that she would not even postpone her trip to Paris till the new campaign engaged solely for Mabel's benefit could arrive.

"Lady Mabel will do very well with you, Bond, for a few days. I expect the governess next week. You can let me know if she comes."

Bond was furious.

"Just to deliver that poor child over to a woman she's never seen, and not even to wait to see how the poor lamb takes to her! Miss Smith may be very nice, but then she mayn't."

The butler interposed. He and Mrs. Bond were very good friends, though she looked down on him as being new in the family's service. He had held his post about ten years.

"They do say Mrs. Pemberton had the choosing of the governess, Mrs. Bond, so she can't be such a bad one."

"Not if Mrs. Pemberton had the finding of her. She's a sweet woman, if ever there was one."

"Who'd ever think she was own cousin to my lady?" demanded Jenkins.

The family departed, all but Mabel, and Mrs. Bond did her best to take care of her favourite and cheer her up, but it was a difficult task. The child was nervous, and had a positive dread of strangers; add to that the fact that for years her mother had held the threat of a governess over her head as the most dreadful punishment she could think of, and you have some idea of the anticipations with which Lady Mabel looked forward to Miss Smith's advent.

"I know she'll be horrid, Bond," said the spoilt child, with all the feebleness of an invalid, "and I shall hate her."

"You'll like her very much, Lady Mabel."

"No, I shan't."

"Wait and see."

"I had a letter from Madeline the other day," said Mabel, ruefully, "and she had seen her."

"Didn't Lady Madeline like her?"

"She said she was quite old, and looked like a widow. I wanted some one young and bright."

"Widows aren't always old, Lady Mabel; besides, the lady who's coming is Miss Smith, so she can't be a widow."

But it was a relief to them all when the day came for the arrival. Lady Mabel was persuaded to be dressed in her white muslin and crimson

sash, and to wait tea for Miss Smith, who, it was calculated, would be at Field Royal about six; really, it was half-an-hour earlier when the hired fly drew up at the old porticoed entrance.

Mrs. Bond was detained in Lady Mabel's room, but the nurse as the next most important female servant, received the governess, and ushered her into two pretty rooms communicating, and furnished as bedroom and sitting-room. This functionary, whom Dolly's arrival would relieve of half her work, was particularly gracious.

"The men'll bring up your baggage directly, miss, and Lady Mabel's waiting tea. Mrs. Bond, the housekeeper, 'll come and take you to her as soon as she can. All the family are away."

"Is the little girl all alone?"

"That's nothing new, miss; the Countess never will be troubled with Lady Mabel if she can help it. She's delicate, poor child, and the least thing makes her fret."

Left alone, Dolly wondered if she was the victim of a dream. It seemed impossible that that pretty room and its elegant furniture could possibly be for her.

Fortunately Mrs. Pemberton had handed a very handsome sum to Dolly as the price of the lace, and had also given her some kind hints as to her wardrobe.

When she had changed her dress, and stood waiting for Mrs. Bond to take her downstairs, it would have been hard to find a more elegant-looking girl than the one who, a fortnight ago, had sung for money in the streets.

Yet, she only wore a black spun silk dress, but, then, it fitted close to her taper figure, and the crêpe trimmed at the throat and sleeves only enhanced the whiteness of her neck and wrists; her beautiful hair glistened like threads of gold, her violet eyes had a touching pathos in their depths, the flickering freight seemed to make a sort of halo round her head, and she looked like anything in the world rather than a penniless dependent.

The door opened and Mrs. Bond entered, Dolly turned to meet her, and for an instant they stood face to face—only an instant. Then, with a startled cry, the housekeeper sank on to a chair, trembling in every limb.

Frightened at this sudden illness, as she deemed it, Dolly asked gently if she could do anything for her, or if she should ring for assistance.

"No, oh, no!" gasped the housekeeper. "I shall be better presently; it was a kind of spasm."

Dolly thought it a very painful one, and expressed her sympathy. By degrees Mrs. Bond grew better; the ruddy colour returned to her cheeks, and she expressed herself able to go downstairs.

"I'm but a cold reception for you, miss, the family all away, and—"

Dolly smiled sweetly.

"I came to be useful, you know, not for pleasure. If only Lady Mabel will like me I shall be quite content."

"Lady Mabel may like you," thought the good housekeeper to herself, "but her mother won't. Poor child! your face will be a fatal blow to her. I reckon you'll not stay here long after the Countess comes home."

But aloud she said nothing of this, she made some homely speech of welcome, and then opened a door to show a tea-table, loaded with silver and china and the good things of this life.

"Lady Mabel, here is your governess!"

Lady Mabel gave a little cry.

"You look just like a fairy," she said, ruefully. "I'm afraid you'll vanish away."

"Not while you want me."

"But you're so pretty, much too pretty for a governess. Madeline said you were old and cross, and looked just like a widow."

Dolly smiled.

"Perhaps she meant because I was in deep mourning."

The child looked round sharply.

"Who's it for?"

"My mother."

Mrs. Bond seemed to be listening to the conversation as though chained to the spot by some strange fascination. Here she put in a question.

"And your father, mightn't make bold to ask, miss, is he alive still?"

"Oh, no! he died before mamma. I had no one in the world but mother."

As the days passed on Lady Mabel and Dolly became fast friends; the child who had so few to love and the lonely orphan seemed attracted to each other as by a spell. Never in the memory of the servants had Mabel been better or happier since her accident. Glowing accounts were sent by the housekeeper to Lady Desmond, and Field Royal generally rejoiced at Mrs. Pemberton's choice.

And the choice herself!

Dolly felt happier than she had thought possible. She had never taken kindly to household duties, had ever hated the daily routine of the dressmaker's workroom. To sit with Mabel and hear her ample lessons, to study with her under the masters who came twice a week from Chesham, or drive along the beautiful country lanes—all this was a new life to Dolly; and then in the gloaming, before the lamps were lighted, she used to go to the piano and amuse herself with the low, sweet melodies which she played so perfectly, although she had never learned a note of music.

She had not forgotten her mother, she never could forget her; the old battered egg which was her legacy was packed away in Dolly's box—she could not bear the sight of it. But the other, that her mysterious friend had bought for her to give her mother, was in her workbox. She often thought of him and wondered if he had been in the least disappointed to find her gone when he called at Elizabeth-street. Oh! how the sound of his voice haunted her. Oh! what would she not have given just to see his true, kind face again!

Dolly was a general favourite with the servants, only the old housekeeper regarded her with a pitying kindness, which half puzzled the girl. Mrs. Bond seemed to Dolly to take almost too much interest in her; without being inquisitive she was always eager to know about Dolly's past; and once, when the girl mentioned heedlessly that she should be eighteen next September, the poor housekeeper was taken with another attack of trembling almost like the one she had on the night of Miss Smith's arrival.

"I don't like it," muttered Mrs. Bond to herself one night in her own snug sitting-room; "I can't make it out. Of course there are plenty of girls who will be eighteen next September, and I dare say some of them have eyes like that. But I don't like it; and oh! what will my lady say when she comes home!"

But apparently my lady was not coming home; as yet no date for her return had been spoken of. Mabel seemed likely to be the only representative of the family at Field Royal for some time to come, when one afternoon Mrs. Bond looked in upon Dolly and her pupil with a startled piece of news.

"What will you say's going to happen, my lady!" she asked the child. "Who do you think's coming to-night? I've just had a telegram to say so."

"Not father!" asked the child.

It was easy to tell from her tone "father" was the best-beloved of all her relations.

"No, my dear; it's your brother. He's coming for a week's hunting, and brings three or four friends with him."

"I don't care."

"But you should care, my dear," said the old woman reprovingly. "Viscount Devereux's a fine young gentleman, as'll be Lord Desmond; besides, dear, he's your own brother."

Neither of them noticed Dolly's face grow ashen white. The name was a revelation to her. Could it be possible her cruel persecutor was Mabel's brother! Must she meet him here in his father's house!

Oh! why had she never guessed it before! All Mabel's belongings bore the monogram "M.D." Of course, the D stood for Devereux, while she, unlearned in aristocracy as she was, had believed that an Earl's daughter, like a commoner's, had the same name as her father.

Yes, that was it. That poor suffering child was Mabel Devereux, not Mabel Desmond, and



COULD IT BE TRUE? THE FACE BEFORE HIM WAS THE FACE OF VIOLA, COUNTESS OF DESMOND.

she (Dolly) was in the house that must one day belong to her tormentor.

"I'm very sorry," said Mab, slowly; "but, perhaps, he'll not come here. I don't like Jack; he always laughs at me."

Dolly could well believe it. To laugh at anything weak and helpless was quite among the qualities she attributed to the Viscount.

Four young men, all of good families, going down for a week's hunting in the country! Three of them knew not the meaning of care, three of them had never had a real trouble. No wonder the journey was a pleasant one—no wonder the quarters had a very cheerful time of it that bright March day as they travelled to Northshire.

None of the guests were very much attached to their host. They got on very fairly with him, found him an amusing companion; but they would have hated the idea of trusting a sister to his keeping.

Herbert Sinclair, Ivor Vernon, and George Dugdale were all between twenty-five and thirty, and in mind and heart superior to Viscount Devereux.

"We shall have a good time of it," said Devereux, amiably. "My mother and the girls are in Paris. We shall have the whole house to ourselves, and no one to trouble us."

"What a misanthropical sentiment for a married man!"

"I'm not married yet."

"You're next door to it."

None of the visitors had been to Field Royal before, and they all looked with admiration on the lovely grounds. Herbert Sinclair, who was an artist, specially noticed the river's winding course.

"I suppose you're overdone with fellows sketching here in the summer!"

"Not we!"

"That river would be the paradise of an artist."

"Do you know that to this river I shall owe my earldom?"

"Nonsense!"

"How?"

"Give us the history, Devereux."

This was from two of the guests. The third, Herbert Sinclair, kept silent.

Nothing loth, John related how his beautiful young aunt and her unborn child had perished in the waters.

"But for which fact," he concluded, "your humble servant, and his father, too, would have been plain John Devereux all their lives."

Each of the listeners hated him for telling the story, specially for the way in which he told it; but they were men of the world, and concealed their indifference.

"You ought to have a family ghost," said Sinclair, "with such a history as that. Do you mean to say you haven't?"

"I don't know."

"Doesn't Lady Desmond's spirit ever haunt this river's banks? Come, man, confess."

"Not that I ever heard of."

"You're not sure!"

"The fact is since her death the spot has been shunned. This driver is new to the neighbourhood, or he would never have brought us this way. Our own coachman won't take his horses past. My father and mother never come by here or take their guests. I believe if it had been possible they would have had the river filled up."

"Devereux, I shall get up the first thing to-morrow morning and explore the banks of the river thoroughly."

"You'll find nothing."

Herbert Sinclair was an artist. He loved art for its own sake, and having plenty of money followed it merely as a pleasure. The idea of a picture of the Field Royal grounds, introducing the river's bank made bare and lonely, struck him. He might call it "Haunted." Well dished up, such a subject must succeed.

Full of his purpose he was out-of-doors the next morning before seven had long struck. With some difficulty he found his way to the

river, and stood looking thoughtfully upon the bright, sparkling waters.

"Who would think they hid such an awful tragedy!" he muttered to himself. "The honourable viscount is a greater wretch than I took him for, or he'd never have told that story with a laugh on his lips. Why, I have heard my mother tell it with the tears running down her cheeks, and my father with a break in his voice. I can just remember Lady Desmond, and what a fairy-like creature she was. She came to see us just after the wedding, and her husband introduced me to her as his godson. How my mother cried when the news came of her death."

His memory went back to his childhood's days. He seemed to see his godfather's beautiful young wife again. Child as he was at the time, not more than nine or ten, he had never forgotten her fair, sweet voice.

Just then a song fell on his ears. He heard the rich, sweet voice of some girl singing the old Scotch ballad, "In silk attire." He looked up to see what sort of face went with that perfect voice, and then he held his breath in bewilderment. He had talked lightly enough of the river's banks being haunted. Could it be true? He fancied so, in spite of nineteenth century common sense disbeliever in ghosts, for the face before him was the face of Viola, Countess of Desmond.

(To be continued.)

AMONG the curious inhabitants of Australia are a species of termites called the "meridian ants," because they invariably construct their long, narrow mounds so that the principal axis of the dwelling runs exactly north and south. These mounds are six or eight feet in height, and consist of a series of spires topped with smaller spires, and when viewed end on, they show a remarkable resemblance to a many-spired cathedral.



"CLEAR OUT!" WAS THE AMIABLE COMMAND OF MR. FERRIS. "JUST TAKE YOURSELF OFF, MISS!"

THE BRIDE OF AN HOUR.

—301—
CHAPTER VII.

In all the annals of Margrave Court there had never been such a commotion as that which followed Veronica's wedding.

Lady Leigh had taken a great fancy to her niece; she soon discovered that Veronica had nothing of her mother in her nature, and was her father in mind and character; the kind, motherly woman felt a thrill of remorse for the long years in which they had left Veronica rigidly alone, and even asked her husband whether he thought the girl was happy in her engagement.

Sir Lionel replied:

"Ashdale's a gentleman, and it must be a comfort to escape from her mother; but I shouldn't like one of our girls to marry a man who had sown so many wild oats; but it's too late to think of that, Grace, the Earl seems devoted to her, and she may never now learn what his past has been."

And then, on a dreary November day, in the presence of the guests gathered at Margrave Court, and of many a rustic from the village, who stared admiringly at the ceremony, Veronica plighted her troth to Leonard Dane, Earl of Ashdale, and perhaps it was only her Aunt Grace, of all those present, who felt that the marriage was something like sacrilege.

Lady Leigh hastened home and was in time to receive his faltering bride from the Earl, and to convey her safely upstairs before her mother reached the Court.

"I hope she is not delicate," Lord Ashdale told his hostess, "I have a great dislike to fanciful ailments."

"I do not consider Veronica delicate, but she has gone through a great deal of excitement lately, and I do not think her mother has been very kind to her. I hope you will be good to your wife, Lord Ashdale, for I fancy, poor little

thing, she has a great many arrears of happiness to make up."

"Of course I shall be good to her," returned the bridegroom; "but, Lady Leigh, may I tell you a secret? I have not the least intention of 'being good' to my mother-in-law."

Lady Leigh smiled; her very brief experience of Veronica's mother had enabled her to gauge that lady's character thoroughly, and she decided the widow was quite competent to take care of herself.

Breakfast went off quite successfully, though a vacant place at Lord Ashdale's right hand represented the bride; the health of the happy pair was drunk with enthusiasm, and the Earl made a capital speech when he returned thanks, and then there was a general move from the luxuriously appointed table, and Lady Leigh thought it was time to seek her niece.

"I will go to Veronica," she said to her sister-in-law, quietly; "as the bride's mother you ought to be here to receive the congratulations of the guests," and the little widow fell into the trap laid for her and agreed at once.

Lady Leigh met her own maid on the landing outside Veronica's door.

"I thought I might help Lady Ashdale to change her dress, my lady," the woman said respectfully; "but I can't make her hear, though I have knocked twice."

"I hope she has not fainted again," replied Lady Leigh. "Come with me now, Mary, it is later than I intended, and we have no time to lose, the carriage will be round in a quarter of an hour."

She opened the door and went in; no one was in the pretty sitting-room, where she had left the bride to rest. Passing on to the further room, a shock awaited her. On the ground, in a snowy heap, lay Lady Ashdale's wedding dress, her veil and wreath of orange-blossoms, and on the dressing-table was a note addressed to Lady Leigh.

"Hush!" said her mistress, as a startled cry escaped the maid. "Mary, remember, I trust

you; not a word to anyone of this until I give you leave to speak."

"She must have run away, poor dear young lady," said Mary sorrowfully; "I never thought she looked happy, my lady."

But Lady Leigh was reading the letter. Such an one had never come under her notice before. Had she been asked that morning if she should pity or blame a runaway wife she would have answered she could have no feeling but grief and indignation for such a sinner; and yet as she read those few heart-broken lines all her sympathy was for Veronica—not for the noble Earl of Ashdale.

"DEAR AUNT GRACE,

"You have been so kind to me that I cannot leave your house without begging you to forgive me. When I stood by Lord Ashdale's side this morning in church I meant, God helping me, to be his faithful wife, but since then I have learned what, in my eyes, releases me from my marriage vow, and would make it a sin for me to live with him."

"Lord Ashdale has a wife already, whom he married in a London church eight years ago; she is the mother of his child, and has never failed in love to him. While she lives no other woman can share his life."

"When you left me she must have been waiting in the next room, she came in and implored me to give her back her husband, and the father of her child. . . I know my mother would never let me give up the advantages of such a marriage, and so I am going away. Don't be angry with me Aunt Grace. . . Indeed, indeed, I am only doing what I think right. How can I break another woman's heart? How can I live with a man who has a wife already! Have pity on your unhappy
"VERA."

Never in all the years of her happy, prosperous life had Lady Leigh been face to face with such a dilemma. The maid stood awaiting her orders. She knew that in a few moments Lord Ashdale

would send to inquire the reason of his bride's delay. The house was full of guests, and the scandal would be a terrible one. Lady Leigh did the wisest possible thing, she sent for her husband and put Veronica's letter into his hands.

"Lionel, what are we to do?"

Sir Lionel looked agast. A simple country gentleman, he was no puritan, and would have looked over a few youthful misdeeds in his niece's husband. But if Lord Ashdale had indeed committed bigamy, he would let no respect for his coronet save him from the vigour of the law.

"Mary," he said to the maid, who still waited,

"Tell Lord Ashdale I want to see him in the library. Ask Mr. Nigel to announce to the guests that through my niece's increased illness she will be unable to start on her honeymoon to-day. Miss Helen must do her best to entertain the visitors staying in the house until her mother can return to the drawing-room."

"And Mrs. Leigh, Sir Lionel?"

"Give no special message to her," Sir Lionel quietly locked the doors of the two rooms which had been assigned to his niece, put the keys in his pocket and turned to his wife.

"Will you come with me Grace, or would the scene be too much for you?"

"I will join you in a few minutes, I want first to try and find out how the woman who claims to be Lady Ashdale got admitted to Veronica's rooms."

The Earl of Ashdale was feeling desperately offended, he was not accustomed to be treated cavalierly. He was a great match for Sir Lionel's portionless niece, and at least deserved some consideration.

But when he reached the library, one look at his host's grave, troubled face disarmed his wrath.

"Good Heavens, Leigh, what is the matter, you can't mean that Veronica is seriously ill."

"There is some terrible misunderstanding," said Sir Lionel. "I only hope it may prove only a misunderstanding, Lord Ashdale. While we were at breakfast a woman forced herself into Veronica's presence, claiming to be your wife and the mother of your children."

Lord Ashdale staggered against a chair, for one moment he seemed overwhelmed, the next he had pulled himself together.

"I would not have had such a *contretemps* happen for the world," he said earnestly. "Poor Vera. Dear little girl, no wonder she was terrified."

"But is it true?" demanded Sir Lionel. "I cannot show you my niece's farewell letter, because my wife has it. But Vera asserts this woman declared you married her in a London church eight years ago."

"Vera's farewell letter—you can't mean that my wife has left the Court?"

"Poor child, remember, she believed she was not your wife. Pardon me, Ashdale, but my niece has no father to fight her battles, and I must demand an answer to my question. When you stood beside Veronica at the altar this morning, were you free to marry her?"

"Of course I was," said Lord Ashdale earnestly. "You don't suppose I would attempt bigamy, or try to wrong a sweet, innocent girl like Vera. This morning I was a bachelor, I am now a married man, and your niece is the Countess of Ashdale."

"Then how explain this letter?" The speaker was Lady Leigh, who had entered in time to hear the last words.

Lord Ashdale read poor Vera's sorrowful farewell, and a feeling of passionate anger filled his heart. Not against the young girl he had married, but against the unhappy woman he had already so greatly wronged.

"She ought to be ashamed of herself," he cried, hotly. "The idea of her coming here and forcing her wretched story on my wife."

Sir Lionel looked very grave.

"I am waiting for your explanation, Lord Ashdale, you need not fear to speak before my wife; she has heard so much, she must necessarily hear more if she is not to think of you as a bigamist."

"I should prefer to speak to you alone," said

the Earl, "as a man of the world, you will understand my story."

"I must request once more that you satisfy us both on two points: Was the woman who forced herself into our house your wife; if not, what claim has she on you?"

"She has no claim whatever on me. She is a Scotchwoman, and years ago she was travelling companion to an old lady whom I knew well. When her protectress died, instead of seeking a fresh situation Miss Graham decided to study art. She lived alone in Paris for some months, in the student quarter of the gay city, and she found that art did not pay. It was hardly likely, after the life she had led, she could return to being companion to a lady. She was a handsome, dashing sort of young woman, and I admired her. Finally we agreed to be married under the name of Lorne. Of course we both knew that, as she was aware Lorne was not my real name, the ceremony would be invalid."

"You are sure she knew it," demanded Sir Lionel, very gravely.

"I told her so myself," replied Lord Ashdale. "When the time came for us to part, she asserted, positively, that she was my lawful wife. I had a great deal of trouble with her. Finally, she accepted an allowance of five hundred a year, and I have never seen her since."

"And that is?"

"Three or four years ago."

"And you have not heard from her since?"

"I have heard from her," admitted Lord Ashdale, "twice. She wrote to me in September, when she heard of my return to England; she wanted me to marry her again in my proper name. She assured me if I married her as a widow I could adopt her daughter, and give her my name, though I could not bestow on her the courtesy title of 'Lady.' She had her plan very cleverly made out. She was of Scotch birth, and in Scotland the subsequent marriage of the parents legalizes children born out of wedlock. I think that may have had something to do with her solicitations; and though she knew perfectly she was not Lady Ashdale, she seems to have had a fixed delusion that I could have no other wife while she lived."

"I have just heard," said Lady Leigh, "that a ladylike woman came to the back door as soon as we had started for church, and declared the dressmaker had sent her with some part of Veronica's travelling costume which had been forgotten. She was shown upstairs to wait for her return. Most probably she was in the further room when I was settling Vera on the sofa just before the breakfast."

Sir Lionel looked very troubled.

"It so happens that all our guests are leaving to-day, as my wife and I were starting for London to-morrow. I have already sent word that Veronica is so indisposed she cannot start on her honeymoon, so that scandal is averted for the present. But what are we to do about her mother?"

"Mrs. Leigh was going on a visit to a friend at Bournemouth," said Lord Ashdale. "I had better tell her Vera is asleep, and that I will make her adieux. She intended to go up to town by the last train and sleep there."

"By seven o'clock the house will be clear," said Lady Leigh. "I can trust my maid. In the morning we must think of some plan for persuading people that you and Vera have started on your honeymoon. Nothing can be done in the way of searching for her to-night. There is only one more train to London, and by that all our guests will travel, so by making inquiries then the truth would certainly be made known to them."

Lord Ashdale went to hold his conclave with his mother-in-law. Sir Lionel drew a little nearer his wife and took her hand.

"Grace, don't look so troubled."

"I can't help it, Lionel; look which way I will things seem terrible for that poor child."

"She is Lord Ashdale's wife," said Sir Lionel, gravely. "It was not a creditable story he told us, but I am certain it was true."

Lady Leigh sighed.

"I think I would rather Veronica were not his wife."

"Grace."

She tried to explain herself.

"They parted within an hour of the wedding. No shame could attach to her, because she had stood at his side during the marriage ceremony, and, Lionel, can't you see, now she is bound to him as long as they both live, and how can she respect a man whose past holds such a terrible secret?"

Sir Lionel looked gloomy.

"There's one question I've been asking myself, over and over again, Grace, without getting any nearer to an answer: Why did Veronica run away?"

"His wife opened her eyes."

"Because she would not live with Lord Ashdale; surely, Lionel, that is clear enough."

"You don't understand. Did she go because she honestly believed she was not his wife and that the woman who told her so was really and truly Lady Ashdale; or did the poor girl realize that she was bound to the Earl for all time, and run away because she would not be compelled to live with a man who had so wronged another woman?"

"It does not matter much which Vera believed," said Lady Leigh. "The first thing is to find her."

"It matters everything."

"But how?"

"If my first idea is right why then we have only to find her, convince her she is really the Earl's wife and all is well; but if she knows she is Countess of Ashdale and is too pure-hearted to live with a man she deems a scoundrel, why then the cruellest thing we can do is to help Ashdale to find her, since she would be miserable in the gilded cage he would call her home."

"I see," Lady Leigh spoke in a very low voice, "but she must be ambitious, Lionel, or she would not have married a man old enough to be her father."

"I don't know, Ashdale is very fascinating, and her mother probably made the match; the girl was brought up at a sort of institution, and probably knows nothing of love and lovers; she may have thought Lord Ashdale a much more agreeable companion than her mother and have mistaken gratitude for affection."

"Heaven help her, poor child," said Lady Leigh, feelingly, "for it seems to me that no one on earth can."

CHAPTER VIII.

Of course Leonard Maxwell heard of his cousin's encounter with Miss Dean, and he chafed Bernard unmercifully on the subject.

"You know old boy," said the artist cheerfully, "you are the last person in the world I should have expected to play knight errant and assist Beauty in distress; generally, you never seem even to see if a girl is pretty."

"I never said Miss Dean was pretty," declared Bernard, "she looked just tired out and I felt sorry for her."

"I suppose your *protégé* is respectable," said Leonard, drily, "for no doubt you are aware that if she decamps with any of our landlady's portable property Mrs. Burns will expect you to make it good, since you recommended the young woman to her notice."

"Miss Dean is a lady," objected Bernard, "I wish you would not call her a young woman."

"They are all 'ladies' now," returned the incorrigible Leonard, "even the black-robed white-aproned Phyllis who brings me a chop and potatoes when I lunch humbly at a cheap restaurant."

"I am glad you are in better spirits to-day," said Bernard, resolved to carry the war (otherwise the bantering) into the enemy's country. "I am sure you seemed quite in despair yesterday on the acquisition of an aunt."

"I own I did," confessed Leonard. "It was beastly caddish of me, too, but I've pulled myself together now. My uncle comes of a long-lived race and has probably another thirty years to live, by that time I should be fifty-four and if I have to live in abject poverty till then it would be too late to adapt myself to wealth. I should

die like the woman who married the Lord of Burleigh from 'the burden of an honour unto which I was not born.'

Bernard laughed till he nearly cried.

"Leonard, you are too absurd, and I beg to deny that your poverty is abject."

Leonard smiled.

"It doesn't seem so now while we are young and have only ourselves to think of, but when we turn thirty we shall feel differently; and I'd have you remember, Bernard, we might fall in love, and then what should we do?"

"Fall out again with all possible despatch, since we couldn't possibly afford a wife."

"She might be able to keep herself," said Leonard. "I wonder if I got an introduction to my new aunt whether she would invite me to her receptions and introduce me to an heiress. Bah, what rubbish I am talking, after ignoring me all these years the Earl of Ashdale's not likely to think me a fit acquaintance for his wife."

Meanwhile the inhabitant of the attic was sitting in an old chintz-covered elbow chair, drawn close to the very diminutive fire, and trying to map out her future. She had given the name of Violet Dean on the spur of the moment, for she dared not give either the name which had been hers till yesterday or the title to which the ceremony in Margrave Church had given her a right, for Mrs. Burns's humble lodger was, in truth, Veronica, Countess of Ashdale.

She had just enough worldly wisdom to feel that as the few clothes she had brought were marked with a "V," she had better keep to that initial. Violet was the first name beginning with a V that occurred to her, and Dean followed quite naturally, because years ago she had had a little schoolfellow called Violet Dean. The friend of her childhood was dead. She had loved Veronica very dearly, and would, the distracted girl knew perfectly well, have gladly lent her anything, even her name.

Poor little bride! She had not had much time for plans. Her one desire, after she had listened to Mrs. Lorne's story, was flight. She did not stop to ask herself whether the law would call herself or poor Margaret Lord Ashdale's wife, she only felt that she could not live with a man who had so wronged another. She knew absolutely nothing of our marriage laws, and, in her innocence, it seemed to her that if she went away and the Earl never saw her again, that the ceremony in church could not be binding on her, and he might yet do justice to little Nora's mother.

She dressed herself hurriedly, and stole down the grand staircase while everyone was at the wedding breakfast. Before Lady Leigh had left the table to go to her niece, Veronica had caught the London train at Thornton Junction, and was speeding towards the great city, of which she knew so little, a few clothes in a small bag, and five pounds in her pocket, her only worldly possessions.

It was on the journey that the thoughts of the Hiltons came to her, and it was a bitter disappointment to find that they had left London.

Poor little girl! She had five pounds in her pocket, and not a friend in the great city, unless, indeed, she might count Bernard Maxwell as one. Of all the people she had known in the past there was no one to whom she could appeal. Mrs. Fox had, perhaps, been kindest to her of anyone in Waldon, but how could she ask the lawyer's wife to help her when her husband derived a large part of his income from Lord Ashdale's agency. No, she had no one to lean on. She must help herself. Not so very long ago she had talked bravely of earning her own living, but then she had no secret to hide, nothing to conceal. She could have gone to the principal of the school where she had spent so many years, and asked her to recommend to her a situation. Now she had no one to speak for her. Whatever work she obtained she must find for herself. She had very little knowledge of the world, but she possessed a good deal of common-sense, and she knew perfectly that even the modest rent of ten shillings a week would soon exhaust her tiny hoard. The need for earning money and earning it soon was urgent. The

only question was how. She ventured to ask Mrs. Burns which newspaper was best for advertisements, and the landlady graciously lent her the *Daily Telegraph*. Vera went out and laid in a modest supply of stationery, then she came back to her attic and wrote twelve letters, in which she offered to do almost anything, from serving in a florist's shop to addressing circulars at four shillings a thousand. Surely out of the twelve she must obtain one favourable reply, and she began to feel quite hopeful, and to wonder how long it would take to address the thousand circulars if they were entrusted to her care. A thousand a day would she calculated quite suffice for her modest wants.

Poor lonely bride. When she had been a fortnight in London, and written over a hundred letters, she was still no nearer employment. No one even answered her applications, and if she called personally, in reply to advertisements, it was always the same result—failure.

One lady, a little kinder than the rest, told her plainly she was too pretty for a governess, and that a governess without references would never find a situation. An old lady who wanted someone to read aloud four hours a day for five shillings a week, declared, "Miss Dean's voice was not near loud enough." One or two offices, who wanted a female clerk, said her writing was not businesslike; and a butcher requiring someone to keep accounts, demanded a guarantee of fifty pounds, as she would have to receive payments from weekly customers, and large sums of money would pass through her hands.

It was terrible. December was a week old, and the shops began to be full of "Christmas presents," the streets to be thronged by a crowd intent on Christmas purchases. Veronica grew pale and thinner every day. Her little hoard was melting fast. When it was ended what would become of her?

She knew that her friends were seeking her. Many of the newspapers, whose pages she scanned for advertisements of employment, had an announcement in the agony column that if "V." would return to her devoted husband all could be explained. And later a reward of twenty pounds was offered for the address of a young lady believed to have reached Liverpool Station early in the evening of November 24th. A very accurate description of her followed. But she had been prepared for this, and from the moment of coming to Mrs. Burns had altered her style of hairdressing, while the trouble and anxiety of the past fortnight had made her so thin and wan that she was sadly changed from the lovely, bright-eyed girl Lord Ashdale had married.

Mrs. Burns was kind to her attic lodger, but never guessed how slender were Miss Dean's means, how few coins stood between her and destitution. Her own impression was that the girl had left her home in a fit of pique, and that when she found how hard it was to earn her bread, she would go contentedly back to her friends. To do the landlady justice, had she had an idea how desperately Miss Dean needed to earn money, she would have tried to help her find employment, for though a working woman, Mrs. Burns had a certain standing of her own, and would certainly have been accepted as a reference by any of the shopkeepers in her own neighbourhood.

"If only I dared write to Aunt Grace she would help me," thought the lonely little wanderer; "but she might think it right to tell Uncle Lionel, and he would make me go back to the Earl, and I couldn't do it. I think I would rather kill myself than have to live with Lord Ashdale now I know him as he is."

Then came a day when she had changed her last sovereign, and after putting the next week's rent carefully by, she had but two or three shillings in her pocket. When they were gone, what would become of her?

There was an advertisement in the paper which sounded hopeful. A large fancy shop in the Borough wanted an extra hand for the Christmas trade. It expressly said no experience was necessary, and Vera started quite cheerfully,

although the walk was long, and she dared not spend even a penny on an omnibus.

She found the shop, and her heart sank. It was one of those establishments which are noted for "bargains," and do what they call a "cutting trade." Judging from the goods displayed in the windows it was a linen-draper's, stationer's, bazaar, and china shop. There was a crowd at every counter, and the assistants looked fagged and tired already, though it was barely eleven o'clock. Veronica spoke to a big, stout man who was walking up and down, and directing customers to the right counters for what they wanted. He pointed to a tiny slip at the end of the long shop, with "counting house" engraved on the glass window, and told her to go there, and Mr. Perks would speak to her.

Mr. Perks, despite his name, was of the Jewish persuasion, and a bad specimen. His finger nails and hands were far from clean, his black hair was, too, thick and crisp, his face had a sinister expression, and yet a leer which frightened Vera.

"I have come about the advertisement," she began, nervously.

"You won't do at all," he said, shortly, "you look half starved."

"I am very strong," she ventured, "and I don't mind how hard I work."

"Where do you live?" he condescended to ask.

"Bloomsbury."

"Been out before?"

"No; but the advertisement said experience was not necessary."

"What references?"

Veronica turned white as death.

"I have no friends in London," she began, sadly; "but indeed—"

"Clear out!" was the amiable command of Mr. Perks; "you ought to be ashamed of yourself for wasting my time like this. Do you think we'd have a hand at this establishment without references? Why, when a handsome girl like you can't get anyone to say a good word for her, she must be a bad lot indeed. Just take yourself off, Miss, we want none but honest folks here."

How she got out of the shop Veronica never knew. Her knees shook under her, and everything seemed swimming round and round, but fear lent her strength, and she managed to leave the establishment of the virtuous Mr. Perks. Another young woman, who had been on the same errand, was staring in at the window when Veronica came out, and struck with pity went up to her.

"You look ready to drop," she said, good naturedly. "Wouldn't the old bear have you? Come across the road to that baker's at the corner, they'll let you sit down there, and I'll get you a glass of milk."

"You are very kind," said Vera, feeling that the offer was of genuine goodwill; "but I have a penny."

"Keep it till you want it," said the red-haired one, as she piloted Veronica across the road, and deposited her on a high chair in a corner of the baker's, while she purchased two glasses of milk and two penny buns. "Now you'll feel pounds better when you've taken this. What was the matter? Old Perks is a regular curmudgeon. Was he nasty?"

"He was awful! Do you know him?"

"I was one of his hands till last summer," returned the red-haired one; "but the work broke me down altogether. A lady got me into a convalescent home at the seaside; and, as I'm to be married in January, I thought I'd not bother about another berth. But when I saw his advertisement I thought if I could earn a pound or two it would help with the wedding."

"And will he have you?"

"Not he." And Lucy Green showed her teeth in a grin. "He said I was too much of a fine lady, with my nerves and delicate health. He's never forgiven me for knocking up. I suppose he thinks it wasn't a credit to the place."

"He is a dreadful man."

"He's bad enough," agreed Lucy. "Why wouldn't he have you? You're pretty, and lady-like, and he likes that sort."

"He said I wasn't honest," a second flush dyed the girl's face, "because I have no references."

"Do you mean your last people won't speak for you?"

"I have never been out before. I used to live at home with my mother. I have come to London to earn my living, and no one will even try me."

"Look here!" said Lucy Green, with rough kindness, "just listen to me. Is your mother alive?"

"Yes."

"Then go straight back to her. Bless you, I can tell a lady when I see one; and I know you are not the kind to stand twelve or fourteen hours a day behind a counter without breaking down! Besides, you'd not get the chance, for every place that's vacant there's fifty girls to fill it; and it's natural those who've been out before get picked first. You're too pretty and gentle to fight your own way. Just you take my hint, and go home to your mother."

Veronica asked her a question.

"Was there not some sort of rough needle-work given out to be done at home, for which no references would be wanted?"

"There's slop-work," said Lucy; "and them, who's been at it all their lives, make seven or nine shillings a-week. You can't live on that. You look a mere child, and you're pretty. You don't know London ways and London wickedness; you'd best go home."

They parted almost like old friends. Lucy turned towards Walworth, where she lived; Veronica walked on and on, hardly heeding where she went, until she found herself on Waterloo-bridge; and here she paused.

Was it really true what Lucy Green had told her? Was it quite hopeless to think of earning her bread in London? then, what was to become of her? She could not go home. Indeed, home she had none, for Mrs. Leigh had given up Clematis Cottage, and had not fixed on a new abode; besides, her mother would have handed her over to her husband like a parcel of his that had gone astray. No; in all the world Veronica could least have trusted her mother. What should she do? This was Monday; on Wednesday she must pay her rent. Besides the half-sovereign for that, she had just three shillings in her pocket—that was all. She had nothing she could sell or pawn. The desperate haste in which she had left Margrave Court had prevented her bringing away more than a bare change of clothes. Three shillings would not purchase much.

She looked over the parapet of the bridge on to the water, and an awful longing came to her to end the struggle she found so hard. No one wanted her here; there was no niche in this great London for a friendless girl.

There was only one thought kept her back. Her father—barely eight years old when he died she yet remembered him still with the tenderest love. He was the one bright spot in her childish recollections. If she did this thing, and ended the life which no one wanted, would it cut her off from all hope of ever seeing him again?

But what was she to do?

Mrs. Burns had been kind enough, but Vera would not think of living on her charity. It was not as though she were sure of employment in a little while; had she the certainty of a situation, say in a month's time, it would not have seemed such an impossibility to her to ask her landlady's forbearance. But alas! a month hence; two months even she might be just as prospectless as she was now.

There must be work in London that she could do; work that she could put her best energy into and give her employer a full return for the trifling sum she needed for food and shelter. But how was she to find that work? It seemed to Veronica that had she been a criminal, newly released from prison, people could not have received the offers of her services with more disdain. Was there no one in all this vast London with enough charity in their hearts to pity her and give her the start she needed?

A woman passing rapidly by noticed Veronica, and stared at her; she waited a minute, then

extracted something from a leather bag she carried, and pushed it into the girl's hand.

"Read it," she commanded; "it may save you." And the Pharisee passed on her way, leaving Veronica looking listlessly at a tract, which bore the cheering title:

"Are you going to Hell?"

Poor Vera, she went on a little further and tried hard to put the dreadful thought of the river out of her head; the bridge seemed endless; surely in time she would be safe on the further side. She put her hand in her pocket instinctively as some rough-looking people jostled by her; but it was too late, her purse was gone.

Gone, and with it the half-sovereign so carefully put away in the inner division for rent, and the three shillings which alone stood between Veronica and destitution. She had not a penny left; she was helpless in great London.

And then it seemed to the girl that the last spark of hope faded; she ceased to struggle with the temptation which urged her to end her troubles for ever in the dark water. She crept a little closer to the parapet; another moment and the fatal plunge would have been taken, but a hand was suddenly laid upon her arm and a deep voice said kindly:

"Miss Dean, have you quite forgotten me?"

It was Bernard Maxwell; she had not seen him since the night she took Mrs. Burns' attic, but she knew him again at once. She wondered if he had suspected her dread intention. Well, she must defer her fell purpose now.

Bernard had guessed everything; a keen observer of human nature—as every writer must be—he knew just what he had prevented, but his one object was to soothe the helpless girl, and, if possible, win her sympathy.

"You are looking quite tired out," he said gently. "Come and sit down at the railway station, and tell me how you are getting on. You know, as I was your first acquaintance in London, I have a right to feel an interest in you."

But a very few minutes showed him that, short as was the walk to Charing Cross, it was beyond her strength. He hailed the first cab that passed (reckless extravagance for a struggling man) and told the man to drive them to Temple Gardens.

"We can talk better here," he said, as he established Miss Dean on a bench. "I am afraid you have not found a situation to suit you. Will you tell me all about it? I have had a great many ups and downs myself, and I think I can sympathise with your troubles better than most people."

"I was just thinking of ending it all," said the girl wearily, "when you spoke to me; I am so tired and life is so hard."

"Dreadfully hard," Bernard agreed; "and yet it has its compensations. Miss Dean, if you will trust me, you may be sure of one thing; I will keep your secret faithfully, and do my best to help you."

"I can't get any work," she said slowly. "I was the head girl at school, and I am fond of teaching; but no one would try me. I have offered to address circulars, to be a copying clerk at eight shillings a week. I went to-day to a cheap shop in the Borough where they wanted someone to sell Christmas Cards; but the man said they took no one but honest people. I am quite honest, only—there is no one to say so."

"I don't think you need regret the last refusal," said Bernard. "I am only a rough, clumsy fellow, Miss Dean, and if I pain you it won't be willingly. Am I right in thinking you have run away from home, and that is why you have 'no references'?"

"Yes," said Veronica slowly, considering how much of her story it would be safe to tell him. "My mother is a widow, Mr. Maxwell, and her one desire is to be rich. She would not let me be a governess because, she said that would be no benefit to her. . . . She wanted me to marry a rich man. . . . do you understand?"

"I think so. And you would not do it."

"I agreed at first, before I knew any better. He was years older than I was, and I thought he would be kind and fatherly; but at last I found out the truth. He was a bad, cruel man;

there was another woman he ought to have married, and if I became his wife it would just have broken her heart. He was all the world to her, and I had nothing but just a friendly liking for him at the first, while after I heard her story I think I hated him."

Bernard Maxwell did not interrupt this long speech by a single word, but when the girl had finished he said slowly:

"And so you ran away?"

"Yes; it seemed the only thing to do. I had five pounds of my very own, and I thought before I had spent it all I should surely get some work; but I changed my last sovereign yesterday, and to-day my purse was stolen. I have not a penny in the world; I have not a single friend. What could I do but try to end my sorrows?"

(To be continued.)

THE EMPRESS OF SONG.

—30—

(Continued from page 81.)

Nina told them, on their return, of the ready assent she had received from Doctor Stone that she might venture out on the following day, and the promise which Mrs. Maunders had given that she would accompany her.

"Why, you look worlds better for your walk, Archie!" she added, returning her husband's caress.

"Yes, dear; I feel all the better, too," was the reply. "And after dinner we will order a carriage for you, to be here during the warm portion of the day."

The morrow broke like its predecessor, the cold frost of the early morning having to succumb to the rays of the bright sun, and at the appointed time the carriage drove up to the entrance of Rose Villa.

Nina felt very strange on her first exit into the open air after her long confinement within the house, and a faintness seemed to come over her when she descended the steps leading to the gravel path; but leaning on her husband's arm she soon recovered herself, although thoughts of the days in which alone she had night after night emerged from the villa on a far different errand passed through her mind, with the reminiscence of the sorrow which was then her portion.

She felt very thankful to be again able to leave the house, and when they proceeded through the bustle and whirl of human life she remembered how near she had been to the verge of the unseen.

"Where are we going to, dear?" she asked, as, leaving the busy streets behind them, they entered on a quieter road, where green hedges and fields, still covered with white frost, yet remained.

"Darling Nina," and Archie drew her nearer to him, "we are going to see Bobby's grave."

"Oh, I am so glad—so glad!" she answered, and when a little later on they stopped at the gates leading to the cemetery she appeared to have attained fresh strength as she alighted from the carriage.

The quiet stillness pervading the spot seemed to cast its spell over them, as with gentle tread they wended their way between the graves of the dead; until their steps stayed where a pure white cross marked the resting-place of one tinier than the rest.

Nina looked long and steadfastly at the stone which denoted the resting-place of her darling; then, turning to her husband, who, with Mrs. Maunders, stood a little apart, as the tears started to her beautiful eyes,—

"Is this your doing, dear?" she asked.

"No, Nina," he replied, "it is the doing of one worthier, it is Robert's. Are you happy now?"

"May Heaven bless him," was her only answer; and then throwing herself on her knees beside the tiny green mound, she burst into a flood of tears; when, once more rising to her

feet, he leant on the arm of Sir Archibald for support.

It was growing chill now again, and Mrs. Maunders advised that they should return to the carriage which was waiting them.

"Tell me, you are not unhappy now, dearest?" said Archie, as he led his wife from the cemetery; "and from this time, darling, we will commence a new life."

"I am not unhappy, love," she replied.

"Yes, darling, a new life in which the misery of the past to both will be but as the darkness which precedes the dawn."

CONCLUSION.

LADY HORTON was seated in her usual place, by a cosy fire in the drawing-room of Singleton Hall, near which a small table was drawn up, with a reading-lamp placed on the same.

She had just completed the last volume of a novel, which was all the rage, sorry that she had arrived at the end, as she placed it on the table, when, looking up at the orologio clock on the chimney piece,—

"Dear me!" she said, "it is past eight and Archie says he will be at home by seven; I hope nothing has happened. I begin to feel quite anxious." And then her ladyship rang the bell to inquire if everything was in readiness, according to her directions, for the reception of Sir Archibald and Lady Horton; when, being satisfied that such was the case, she again referred to an open letter, which laid by the side of the book, from which she read for the twentieth time:—

"DEAREST MOTHER,—

"I told you some time since that I had a surprise in store for you, and when I tell you that that surprise is in the shape of a wife, I trust that you will not take it much to heart that I have been married some time since without your knowledge; but there, I don't think you will when you see Nina; the most loving, beautiful creature that ever called man husband."

"Although, dear mother, when I met her she was a public singer, she is a lady by birth, who, at an early age, when an orphan, to escape the tyranny of a maiden aunt, adopted the profession as a livelihood, but when we meet you shall know all, whilst the very fact of my bringing her to you will, I feel sure, be sufficient guarantee that she is fit to adorn the drawing-room of the highest. Give orders that a suite of apartments shall be prepared for us, as we hope to be with you by seven o'clock to-morrow evening. Till we meet as ever, dear mother, your affectionate son,

"ARCHIBALD HORTON."

"Yes, I thought I was not mistaken," Lady Horton repeated, as she again re-read the letter, and once more removed her gold-rimmed spectacles, and had made up her mind to consult the butler as to the train service from London, when the sound of wheels was heard on the gravel, and a few moments later Archie's well-known voice in the Hall.

"At last, mother dear! We thought we should never reach Singleton," and he pressed the dowager to his breast; and then he turned to where Nina stood a silent spectator of the scene.

"My darling," he said, "come forward; this is my mother, Nina," correcting himself, "the dearest and best that ever lived, and one who will love you, as I trust you will her, for my sake. Is it not so, mother?" and he turned to where he latter stood; whilst Nina, nervous and trembling, advanced to meet her.

"My son's wife will ever find a place in my heart," Lady Horton replied; and then she held out her hands to the girl, who grasped them affectionately, uplifting her sweet mouth for the kiss as affectionately bestowed; and when, a few hours later, Archie told his mother all with the exception of that portion in which Edward played a part, she promised to be a parent to Nina to her life's end, a promise which in the future she never had reason to regret.

But when the summer once more returned, with its roses and honeysuckle, the young couple again left her; but it was only for a few short days, to be spent at Thorn Villa, so that they might be present at the wedding of Robert Melville and Mabel.

And very pretty the latter looked in her ivory satin and Honiton veil; whilst the sun never shone on a happier couple than that in honour of whom the bells rang out a merry peal in the warm noontide of the June day.

Cecilia is still Cecilia Maunders, declaring her intention ever to remain so during her mother's lifetime, Raggy having again sailed for India.

His brother officers were each and all grieved when Sir Archibald no more returned to the old regiment, but some of them are still frequent guests at Singleton Hall; amongst them is Manvers, now Captain Manvers, who declares he never saw such a resemblance as that which Lady Archibald Horton bears to Nina, the Empress of Song.

[THE END.]

IF I BUT KNEW.

—10—

CHAPTER LVIII.

It was with the greatest surprise that Owen received the message that Mary delivered—that Rhoda was too ill to attend the grand ball with him.

"She did not seem to be ill this afternoon," he said to himself.

Obedying a sudden impulse, he hurried from the room, intent upon going to Rhoda's boudoir and offering her his sympathy; but on second thoughts he concluded that in all probability she would not care to be disturbed.

He felt grievously disappointed. He knew that many of his friends would be present; and besides, what could he say to Mrs. Montague and her daughters?

Some of her friends had left Rhoda apparently in the best of health and spirits at noon. How could he account to them for her sudden indisposition?

During the forenoon he saw that there was something on Rhoda's mind; that she was greatly troubled.

Perhaps the words he had said to her only a short time before had much to do with her indisposition.

He felt that he ought to have a talk with her. If he were to reassure her that she could have everything her own way, she might feel much relieved.

A second time he started from her boudoir; but again he drew back. He could not tell what prompted him to do so.

"Such strange, contradictory emotions seem to possess me," he said. "I will go out into the grounds and smoke a cigar. That will quiet me a little, and afterward I will have a talk with Rhoda."

Owen wandered about the grounds for half-an-hour or more. He heard a clock strike the hour of eight.

How dark and gloomy it was! There was no moon, but the stars shed a faint, glimmering light.

He had smoked a cigar; but still he paced aimlessly up and down the grounds, lost in thought.

He came to one of the garden benches. It looked so inviting that he threw himself down upon it.

How long he sat there he never knew. Presently he was disturbed by the sound of slow, cautious footsteps. It could not be one of the servants stealing through the grounds in that manner. It must be some poscher.

He drew back into the shadow of the trees, and watched with no little curiosity. He had been so kind to the villagers that he felt surprised at this apparent ingratitude.

Presently a figure came down the path. The

more he watched the figure the more certain he became that he had seen it before. Its every move seemed familiar to him.

Suddenly a thought flashed into his mind that made him hold his breath.

"Great heavens! can it be George Dalrymple," he ejaculated.

His face paled; great flashes of fire seemed to come from his eyes. The very blood in his veins seemed to stagnate. Faint and dizzy, he leaned back against the trunk of a tree.

What could it mean? His wife supposed him to be by this time on his way to the ball. During his absence would she meet, dared she meet, George Dalrymple?

He sprang to his feet, his eyes flashing fire, every pulse of his being quivering with excitement.

He clutched his hand fiercely over his heart. The man was hurrying toward the brook—ay, toward the very spot where Owen had seen Rhoda and Dalrymple part on that never-to-be-forgotten day of the lawn party.

For a moment he stood irresolute.

Owen was an athlete, and strong of arm. He knew that with one blow of his arm he could fell his foe to the earth.

Rhoda had sent him word that she could not go to the ball; that she was ill; but she was not too ill to see the man who had stolen into the grounds to meet her, perhaps by appointment!

The very thought made him almost wild with rage. He felt sure that there would be murder committed; that he, the last of a noble race, ere the day dawned, would have a terrible crime to answer for.

His very soul was on fire with anger.

Silently he stood there, and thought the matter over. Perhaps, after all, it was a coincidence. Perhaps it was some man who had made an appointment with one of the servants. He would watch and see.

The tall, familiar-looking figure paced impatiently by the brook-side under the dim light of the stars. Yes, she man was there waiting for some one.

From where he stood he could plainly see a faint light in the window of his wife's room, and as his eyes were fixed upon it, the light was extinguished.

If a sword had been plunged into Owen Courtney's heart, it could not have given him a greater shock.

Many a night he had paced up and down the grounds, watching the light in that window. Then it had never been put out before ten. Why should it be extinguished so early to-night?

The thought troubled Owen, as he turned his head and saw the figure still pacing restlessly up and down by the brook.

He dared not utter a word. He would await developments. He scarcely breathed, in his suspense. It seemed to him that the blood in his veins was turned to ice.

He took up a position where there was no possible danger of being observed, and there he watched and waited.

Up in her boudoir Rhoda was donning, with trembling hands, the long cloak that was to disguise her.

She had sent Mary from her room. But it seemed to her that the girl looked back suspiciously as she went out and closed the door after her.

"Heaven help me to get through with this exciting scene!" Rhoda muttered.

Her heart was throbbing so, her limbs were so weak, that she was obliged to sit down for a minute.

"Oh, Heaven help me! How thankful I am that Owen did not send for me before he left for the ball. He has reached there by this time!" she muttered.

She looked at the clock, and said to herself that time was flying, and she must hasten to keep her appointment.

Again she counted over the money which Owen had given her—the money that was to restore her little child to her—the money that was to purchase her freedom and end for ever Kenward Monk's persecutions.

"What would Owen say if he knew all!" she asked herself, in great trepidation.

She trembled even at the thought of it.

Was she doing right in concealing the truth from Owen?

She sprang from her chair and paced hurriedly up and down the room.

If Owen knew all he would surely tell her that her path lay with Kenward Monk, that his roof would shelter her no more. And now she could not part from him. Every fibre of her heart was woven about him.

She tried to look into the future; but think what she would, the pictures presented frightened her.

Presently she paused before the window. Was it only her fancy, or did she only hear the pattering of raindrops?

She turned out the light and threw open the window. She felt relieved to find that it was only the leaves that were tapping against the window-pane. She closed the window with a sigh, and opened the door softly.

The corridor was empty; the gas-jets of the great chandeliers were turned low. Like a thief in the night, she stole noiselessly down the winding passage-way.

The sound of laughter from the servants' hall below floated up to her through the awful stillness.

What if one of the doors on either side should open, and some one step out and confront her?

She drew her long cloak closely about her, and pulled the hood down over her head.

There was a side door opening on to a porch, and leading directly into the grounds.

Rhoda hurried towards this door and opened it cautiously. For a moment she stood on the threshold, and in that moment a gust of wind blew the cloak from about her shoulders, and it fell at her feet.

The light from the hall lamp clearly revealed her form to Owen, who stood leaning against an oak-tree scarcely one hundred feet distant.

"It is Rhoda!" he muttered, hoarsely.

She turned her steps down toward the brook, as he had feared she would do.

"She stayed away from the ball to meet that scoundrel!" he muttered under his breath.

With hesitating steps, little dreaming of what the end of her adventure would be, Rhoda hurried on to her doom.

The wind sighed a mournful requiem in the trees, the songs of the birds were hushed, and the sweet murmur of the brook seemed to end in a sob as it rushed onward to the sea.

The night was warm, but a great shiver crept over Rhoda as she turned out of the path and hurried along through the garden by a short cut to the place where she knew Kenward Monk was impatiently waiting for her.

CHAPTER LIX.

KENWARD MONK had reached the place of rendezvous some few minutes before the appointed time. Up and down he paced impatiently as the moments flew by, yet Rhoda did not put in an appearance.

"Can it be that she intends to fail me!" he muttered, striking his hands fiercely together. "I have her so completely in my power, I wonder if she would dare fail me. How beautiful she is growing! I am almost beginning to fall in love with her. I promised her that she should have a divorce, and said that I would never trouble her again; but I don't propose to give up my fine beauty so easily. I will just play my cards to suit myself. I will force her to wring a fortune from Owen Courtnay, and when there is no more money to be had, she shall leave this roof and come with me, following my fortunes wherever they may lead. She has an exquisite face. Why shouldn't I turn it to account by putting her on the stage? By George! I'll do it! I'll hold the child as a sword over her head. I promised to bring the child with me to-night. Ha! ha! ha! clever as she is, she believed me. When she does not see the child she won't want to hand over the five hundred pounds."

Five, ten minutes passed. Some far-off clock in the village chimed the hour.

Kenward Monk paced up and down the narrow path like an enraged lion.

"I cannot even have a smoke," he muttered, clenching his hands, while fierce oaths broke from his lips. "They are all at the grand ball to-night save Rhoda, and there is no one to hinder her from keeping her appointment. Why does she not come? I will give her fifteen minutes more, and if she does not get here in that time, I will go up to the house and see her, if I have to search through every room in the place. What a genuine surprise my presence will be to the servants. They always hated me, I think. They were always spying on me, and telling that old fool of an uncle my faults, instead of doing the proper thing, helping to hide them from him. If they attempt to bar my way, so help me Heaven! I will burn the house down over their heads!"

He had braced himself up for this interview with Rhoda by taking a couple of draughts from a bottle he had in his pocket.

"I must continue to brace my nerves," he muttered, taking another draught, and still another.

But instead of quieting the feverish blood in his veins, it made it run the more wildly. Presently he lost all sense of prudence, drew a cigar from his pocket, and lighted it.

He strode up and down by the brook side, cursing and scolding by turns.

Kenward Monk was not a man to be trusted when under the influence of drink. As the minutes went by, and Rhoda did not come, he was beside himself with rage.

"What does she mean by keeping me waiting in this manner?" he roared. "By the Lord Harry, I'll make her pay for this!"

Then, like Owen, who was watching but a few feet from him, he saw the light go out in Rhoda's room.

"That must be her room. She is coming at last," he muttered.

He braced himself up against the trunk of a tree for by this time his legs were none too steady under him.

When the door opened, and he saw Rhoda approaching, an exclamation of satisfaction broke from his lips.

"She has waited until the coast is clear," he muttered. "Her cuteness is only rivalled by her good looks. I suppose I'll have to put out the cigar," he continued. "She would be very angry if she were to see it. She'd say it would attract attention. There is no use in having a fight with a woman for any earthly reason save money. But here's for another drink before she approaches. Here's hoping that she has the money with her, and that I'll get not only this, but a good deal more from the same source. What's that!"

He had stopped short, the conviction forcing itself upon his muddled brain that he was not alone.

Did he not hear a muttered imprecation, the hoarse breathing of some one close at hand.

He listened intently; then he muttered,—

"A conscience is certainly a troublesome thing to carry about with one. It always keeps one in a stew, and one never knows what's going to happen next."

He sat down upon a mossy rock and watched the slim figure as it moved slowly over the green sward.

"She is certainly in no hurry to see me," he muttered with a grim smile. "But I'll change all that."

Meanwhile Rhoda had stopped short, and was standing motionless in the path.

Putting her hand into the pocket of her dress, the girl found to her great amazement, that she had come away without the roll of notes she had intended to bring with her. In her excitement she had left the money on the table.

What should she do? There was no course to pursue but to go back for it.

Then a superstitious terror, for which she could not account, seemed to seize her.

"It will surely be a bad omen to return to the house," she told herself; "and yet I dare not meet Kenward without the money. He will say

that my story about forgetting the money is only an excuse.

In the servants' hall quite an animated conversation was just then taking place between Mary, the maid, and old Daniel.

"My mistress acts very strangely to-night," she declared. "She sent me down to tell master that she was too ill to go to the ball. Now that was too bad, when he had set his heart upon her accompanying him. Besides, her illness was only feigned."

"Look 'ere, you maid," cried old Daniel, excitedly, "it would pay you better to mind your own business than to attempt to watch too carefully all that passes between master and young missus."

"I can't shut my eyes to what's going on," returned the girl, pettily, "even though the rest of you are inclined to do so."

"What d'ye mean to insinuate?" retorted Daniel, angrily.

The maid shrugged her shapely shoulders.

"Oh, nothing," she said, airily. "If the rest of you want to be blind as moles, it doesn't follow that I should be the same, does it?" And she laughed an airy, mocking laugh. "But I mustn't waste my time chattering here," she declared. "I've got something else to do."

Despite their importunings to stay and talk—for Mary was the life of the servants' hall—she hurried away from them.

"That gal is like the young pussen who recommended her to my lady," exclaimed old Daniel, angrily. "She's as much like that Honor Morland as though they were two peas in one pod."

"She ought of course to have learned some of her traits, having been in the employ of Miss Morland's aunt, and seeing so much of her every day," returned the housekeeper, complacently.

"If she set such store by her, it's a wonder Miss Honor ever let her go to come here as maid," declared old Daniel.

"Then you think, Daniel, that there's a skeleton in the cupboard?" suggested the housekeeper; that being the only phrase that could rile and bring him to silence.

"I was going to tell you my suspicions concerning that gal; but now you'll find them out for yourself!"

"I will not take the trouble to think of a matter that does not concern me, Daniel," she replied, complacently. "I may say here and now that we shall not quarrel about the matter."

"Yes; but you will listen to what I say," he replied as a parting shot, as he stalked out of the room. "That maid will stand watching. I have seen her with my own blessed eyes steal out into the grounds to meet somebody. If master knew that, how long do you suppose she'd be maid to our young missus?"

"Young folks will be young folks," said the housekeeper. "Don't you go around spying on her, Daniel. Take the advice that you offered to her—mind your own business."

"She's gone out to meet her lover in the grounds to-night again," declared Daniel. "An' it's my duty to see who it is prowling round these 'ere grounds!"

CHAPTER LX.

WHEN Mary left the servants' hall so abruptly, she hurried to her own room.

"Dear me," she muttered, "how quickly time flies! Eight o'clock, and my lady will be waiting for me at the old gate in the lane. I am sure she said eight. I will look again and see."

Hastening to the trunk in her room, she threw open the lid and drew forth a closely written letter which she had received only that morning. It was from her former mistress, Honor Morland.

"I did not have time this morning to read it as carefully as I could wish," murmured Mary. The letter ran as follows:—

"MARY,—I could not get an opportunity of seeing you last week, but I suppose whatever else you have gathered will keep. I am anxious

to know what progress you are making with the mission I have entrusted to you.

"No one could have attended to the matter so satisfactorily as you have, so far. You are to keep the strictest watch over your mistress's movements."

"Make a note of everything, as it might slip your memory, and watch carefully; but on no account let your mistress be so apparent that Mrs. Courtney or any of the servants may suspect you are spying upon her."

"If she writes or receives any letters, you must manage to see them, and report to me in reference to them."

"With the plot that you and I are weaving around her, she will not be able to retain Owen Courtney's love."

"Once again I renew my promises to you, Mary. Help me to find some way to separate them, and when I am Owen Courtney's wife, ask anything in my power to grant, and it shall be yours."

"I have written to George Dalrymple, asking him not to attend the Montague ball, but to come to the brook instead, as I wish to see him particularly. I signed Rhoda Courtney's name to the note."

"You must watch and see if he comes to the brook, and if he does, go quickly and inform your master; but you must not let Mr. Courtney imagine that you know who the man is."

"Watch until you see a man's figure in the grounds, then go to your master, and say—"

"I am quite sure there is a thief in the grounds, sir. A man has been prowling around under the trees since dusk. I am afraid we will all be murdered in our beds. I couldn't find old Daniel to tell him about it, sir."

"He will recognise George Dalrymple, and then the rest will be easy sailing."

"I shall await you to-night at the old gate, a few minutes before eight. In great haste,

"HONOR MORLAND."

"She imagines herself a very smart woman," muttered Mary; "but there's no end of points that I could give her. For instance, she didn't know any better than to sign her name to a tell-tale letter like this. I'll keep this letter," she cried, exultantly, "and some fine day Miss Honor Morland will pay me a nice little sum to have it restored to her."

The girl chuckled to herself at her own cunning; then she replaced the letter in its envelope and put it carefully in her trunk.

Glancing at the little clock on the mantelpiece, she saw that its hands pointed to a quarter after eight.

"It is not my fault that I am late," she muttered, "I have been waiting to tell Mr. Courtney about the man in the grounds, but I have not had the good luck to lay my eyes upon him. He is not in his study, or in the library, or anywhere about the house, unless he is in his own room. I stood opposite his room for about an hour, and still he did not come out. I rapped repeatedly, and still he did not answer. Now, what am I to do?" she asked herself.

"I don't like this place. I don't like the way the other servants in the house treat me, and especially old Daniel."

"At every turn I take, or whenever way I look, I find his eyes on me. I try to look unconcerned, but it doesn't always work."

"He knows very well that he annoys me. That was a pretty good hint he gave me—to mind my own business." Yes, I have an enemy in old Daniel, I am sure.

"I feel rather sorry for Mrs. Courtney, the poor thing! She's such a good soul! She is a much better mistress to me than ever Honor Morland was."

"If I admire any of the dresses that she has worn scarcely a dozen times, she says: 'Take it, Mary, and make it over for yourself.' I almost feel ashamed of my spying upon her and plotting to separate her from her husband."

To be continued.)

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GERTRUDE'S TRUST.

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"What do you think that stupid girl has done?"

"I haven't the slightest idea, my dear," said Edward Sterling, with languid interest, dropping his paper, removing his spectacles, and frowning his grey-haired, motherly-faced wife, who, although past sixty, still declared "that she was able to do a day's work with the best of them."

"Why, she's gone to work and cleaned out the old brick oven that Grandfather Sterling built over so many years ago, and has started a fire in the furnace underneath."

"Well, Jane, I don't see anything very stupid in that."

"I didn't order her to do it," said Mrs. Sterling, a little angrily; "and when I demanded why she did it, she laughed in that silly way of hers and answered, 'I bake a brode-a!' Who ever heard of such nonsense! That oven hasn't been used since I was a little girl, and I've always been able to bake bread in the range."

"I remember the bread that mother used to bake in that old brick oven," said Farmer Sterling, musingly. "Somehow, I think I'd like a slice from a loaf baked there now. Mother's bread had a peculiar flavour, and no doubt it was the oven that caused it."

"Stiff and nonsense!" cried Mrs. Sterling, tossing her grey curls. "It's rather late in the day for you to throw up to me about your mother's bread. I think it's real mean of you, for I have been a good and faithful wife for forty-one years the fifteenth of next month, and—"

Here she broke down completely, and began to sob in a hysterical way, covering her face with her apron.

"Why, little mother," cried a ringing voice, "what's the matter?"

And a bearded, blue-eyed man of five-and-twenty, with his mother's fresh face, and his father's athletic form, walked quickly across the room and took the sobbing woman in his arms.

"Tears! and on the eve of the happiest day of my life!"

"It's all on account of that outlandish German girl, Tom, that you would bring here to put in my place."

"What's Gertrude been doing now?" queried Tom.

"Why, she's cleared up the old brick bake-oven under the shed," said his father, "and I expect will turn out the wedding-bread and cake in fine style. I remember what elegant baking my mother used to do there, but it hasn't been used since I was married."

"I don't see anything so very terrible in that, little mother," said Tom, and he drew his mother towards him and kissed her cheek. "Let Gertrude have her way. She'll do nothing wrong; and after you've got used to her, you'll admit that she's a perfect treasure. She's as neat as a pin, a splendid cook, and the very best of housekeepers. Now that I'm to be master here, I want you and father to take a long rest. You've worked hard and faithfully, and I want to make a return for all your tender love and sheltering care. You shall be lady and gentleman now, and Gertrude and I will do the hard work. Dora, you know, is an excellent housekeeper, and with Gertrude to do the drudgery, will make out splendidly. With the help of a good hand and a half-grown boy, I can run the farm. I left word in the village for Lawyer Salvage to come down to the wedding to-morrow, and bring all the papers, and I'll pay off the mortgage on the farm. I drew the money from the bank, and here it is," tapping his breast-pocket. "Seven hundred and fifty-five pounds in good bank-notes."

"Ain't it dangerous to carry so much money with you, Tom?" said his mother, anxiously, forgetting all about the servant-girl and the old brick oven in her solicitude.

"Well, I thought it better to have it so that I could pay off the mortgage to-morrow, and begin life right. I don't want to run away from my wife the day after the marriage, and I'd have to take a trip to town to-morrow to get it."

"You might have written a cheque," said his father.

"So I might!" cried Tom. "How stupid of me not to have thought of that! But the money's all right. I'll leave it with Gertrude, and she'll take good care of it."

"The mercy's sake!" cried his mother, throwing up her hands in amazement. "You don't mean to say that you're going to leave all that money with that foreign German?"

"Why not?" asked Tom, coolly. "I'll stake my life on her honesty."

"Well, you have more confidence in her than I have," replied his mother; "and, depend upon it, you'll rue the day that you brought her into this house."

"Nonsense, little mother!" cried Tom, with a gay laugh. "In a month's time you'll admit what I know—that she's a perfect treasure. But here I'm wasting valuable time. The carriage is at the door, and you and father are not yet dressed. I'll go out and talk to Gertrude and you get ready, for I don't want to be late at my wedding."

And he hurried from the room while his mother, with a mournful sigh, and his father, with a grim smile, began to make preparations for the ten-mile ride to Farmer Thornley, whose pretty daughter Dora their son was to marry that night.

Tom Sterling was the youngest of three sons, and the only one living.

He had been a wild boy, and had broken away from parental restraint, when a mere lad, and ran away to sea.

He was gone ten years, and during that time everything went wrong at the farm.

A malignant fever carried away his two brothers; the crops failed and the cattle died; and a business entanglement so involved the honest farmer that he was obliged to mortgage the old farm to save his honour.

In his old age he was barely able to pay the interest on this mortgage and meet the taxes, and he allowed the place to run down.

Finally he was threatened with foreclosure, and the workhouse seemed staring him in the face.

On the very day that Lawyer Salvage notified him that the mortgage must be paid when due, Tom came home—a broad-shouldered, bearded man.

They had given him up long since as dead, and welcomed him with extravagant joy.

He had been successful, and although not possessed of a fortune, had saved enough to pay off the mortgage, make some necessary repairs in the old farm-house, and re-stock the farm.

One of the first innovations that he made was to insist that his father and mother should hereafter rest; so he hired a stout man to rebuild the fences and make other repairs, and brought Gertrude Polinsky to preside over the kitchen.

His mother rebelled at this latter arrangement, for the girl could speak but little English, and, as the good farmer's wife declared, had "queer ways."

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The girl was eighteen, black-eyed, black-haired, and possessed of a man's strength.

Tom had brought her home in the ship in which he was interested.

She had given assistance to a fugitive Socialist, and had been obliged to flee from home and kindred.

Tom had met the girl, her friendlessness and danger had excited his sympathy, and he had secreted her aboard his ship. She was devotedly attached to him, and he had the utmost faith in her courage and honesty.

Soon after his return, pretty Dora, who had been his playmate in childhood, blushing consented to be his wife, and they were to be married at the bride's home, and on the following day would have a wedding feast in the new home to which he was to bring her.

While Farmer Sterling and his wife were getting ready for the journey Tom sought Gertrude in the kitchen.

Her face lighted up when he entered, and she immediately led him out to the shed and called his attention to the big bake-oven which she had cleaned out and polished up, and under which a hot fire was blazing.

"One like a fit home-a," she said, and tears moistened her eyes. "I bake-a pie-a, cake-a and brod-a here."

"A good idea," commented Tom. "You can expect us to-morrow morning. We will return by tea o'clock. Look out for everything while we are away, and Gertrude—here he lowered his voice, glanced hastily around him, and drew the package of bank-notes from his pocket—"here is a large sum of money which I drew from the bank this morning to pay off the mortgage on the farm. Take care of it for me."

"I take-a care," she said, in her quaint English, and thrust the notes in her bosom.

Neither saw the evil face that glared at them through the open window, nor heard the stealthy footsteps of the man whom Tom had hired to build the fence, as he crept around the corner of the shed, and sped through the garden towards the barn.

Presently Mrs. Stirling called from the big sitting-room that they were ready, and with a parting injunction to Gertrude to be careful of the money, Tom hurried out and assisted his father and mother into the carry-all.

As it drove away, Gertrude burst into a German love-song, and the oven having heated sufficiently, she began to fill it with bread and cake and pie.

Everything baked splendidly, and the girl was in raptures over the big cupboard full of dainty eatables, to be served up to the wedding-guests on the morrow.

She ate her supper in the kitchen, fed the poultry and the pigs, milked the cows, and then seating herself so that the light of the great kitchen lamp fell over her shoulder, began industriously to knit.

Shortly after sunset the man came in and she got him his supper.

He had some work yet to do at the barn, and while he was absent, Gertrude, who was still knitting, happened to think of a brood of motherless young chickens, that usually took shelter in the corner of the shed, and had to be covered to protect them from the cold night air.

She set the lamp in the window so that its rays would illumine the shed, and had just finished her task when the man stepped in the doorway and barred her exit.

His little eyes glowed balefully, and he had a stout stick in his hand.

"Look here," he said, roughly, "I don't want to do no murder, but I saw the master give you some money this afternoon; I want it. You needn't lie about it; for I saw you put it in your bosom. Hand it out now, or I'll have to hit you on the head with this stick, and take it from you by force."

"Ha!" cried the girl, and her red face suddenly grew pale, while her hand instinctively stole to the hiding-place of the money.

"Give it up, I say!" continued the man; and he took a step towards her and raised the stick.

"Nevalre!" she shrieked.

And tearing the roll of notes from her bosom, she tossed the package through the open door of the big oven, which was now almost cold.

"Curse you!" cried the man.

And when she retreated into the corner of the shed, he ran to the door of the oven, lighted a match and peered in.

There, far beyond his reach, lay the money that he coveted.

He looked about him for something with which to draw it out, but seeing nothing handy, he lowered his head and began crawling into the oven.

As his heavy boots disappeared through the opening, Gertrude, quick as a flash, leaped forward, pushed to the heavy iron door, and dropped the stout bar that fastened it.

"Now-a," she cried, jubilantly, "who-a get-a the money—you bad-a man-a?"

"Let me out!" shrieked the imprisoned thief.

"Let me out, I say!"

"Not-a man-a!" was Gertrude's defiant answer; and she danced up and down jubilantly.

"I'll kick down the door, then, and kill you when I get out!" he bellowed.

"Keek away," retorted the girl. "You keek-a too much-a, I start-a big fire. Bake-a you like a pie-a. Ha, ha!"

And she laughed uproariously at her grim facetiousness.

Nothing daunted by her threat, the man began to rain a shower of heavy blows on the iron door, which cracked and trembled.

From long disuse it had rusted badly, and fearing that it might give way, the girl hurried to the kitchen, and getting a shovel of blazing coals, threw them into the furnace beneath the oven, and piling on dry wood soon had a fire roaring.

When the flames began to crackle the man stopped kicking, and not relishing the idea of being roasted alive, began to beg.

"I thought-a you stop," said Gertrude. "Now I make-a what-a you call bargain. No keek, no fire! Keek, roast-a you like pig-a."

Thoroughly frightened, the man promised to make no further attempt to escape, and Gertrude put out the fire.

She got the lamp from the kitchen, brought out her knitting and a chair, and, seating herself in front of the oven, prepared to watch the imprisoned robber.

The long night hours passed slowly away, but the girl never relaxed her vigilance, and the only sound that disturbed the stillness was the click, click of her needles as they flew in and out.

Occasionally a deep groan sounded hollowly from the oven, but the man inside made no further attempt to kick down the iron door.

Day dawned, and the awakened poultry clamoured loudly for their breakfast; but Gertrude never stirred.

When at half-past nine the wedding guests drove up to the farm-house, Gertrude, whose eyes were red and swollen, leaped to her feet, with a sigh of relief, and, running to the corner of the house, called out to Tom Stirling to come quickly.

When he ran towards her, she led the way to the shed, and pointing to the oven, told the story of her night's adventure.

The thief was taken out, considerably the worse for his night's imprisonment, and two of the young men guests volunteered to take him to the county goal.

The money was found intact, and Gertrude at once became a heroine.

Mrs. Stirling's face softened, and tears came into her eyes when they told her the story; and going up to the girl she threw her arms around her neck and kissed her.

"You are a treasure, Gertrude, and Tom was right. Forgive me if I have been cross to you."

[THE END.]

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FACETIÆ.

CHERRUP: "Make light of your troubles." Hardup: "I do. All the bills I get I burn."

FLIM: "Miss Gotrox is too reserved for me." Flam: "Naturally. She's reserved for me."

"How did you find your uncle, Johnny?" "In apple-pie order." "How is that?" "Crusty."

DIX: "How long has your cook been with you?" Hicks: "This is the second year of her reign."

STRANGER: "How old is the oldest inhabitant of this village?" Native: "There ain't none. He died last week."

"WHAT!" cried the orator, fiercely, "what I ask, causes poverty!" And from the back of the hall a hoarse voice answered, "Lack of cash."

SMITH: "Colonel, do you think there is any money in horse-racing?" Colonel: "Yes, indeed! All mine is."

RYHEL: "I wonder if that gentleman can hear me when I ring!" Maud: "Of course he can. He is closing the window already."

JENKINS: "Then you mean to tell me I have told a lie?" Chambers: "Well, no; I don't wish to be quite so rude as that, but I will say this—you'd make a very good weather prophet."

"I stood there in the silent night," said the poet, "wrapped in thought." "Dear me," murmured Miss Cayenne, "how chilly you must have been."

NELLIE: "Yesterday was my birthday, and Charlie gave me a rose for each year." Sallie: "What a perfectly immense bouquet they must have made."

PALETTE: "D'Auber is very eccentric, even for an artist." Brush: "Yes!" Palette: "He signs his pictures so legibly that anyone can make out the name."

JEANS: "No, I never take the newspapers home. I've a family of grown-up daughters, you know." Beans: "Papers too full of crime, eh?" Jeans: "No, too full of bargain sales."

CITIE: "When my wife gets a cold, I can cure it in a day." Suburb: "What do you give her?" Citie: "Nothing; I say that if she is well by night, I will take her to the theatre."

SPIRIT MEDIUM (to sceptic): "Now that you have conversed with the spirit of your departed brother, are you not convinced? Have you any more objections to offer?" Sceptic: "None—except the fact that my brothers are all living!"

DR. A: "Why do you always make such particular inquiries as to what your patients eat? Does that assist you in your diagnosis?" Dr. B: "Not that, but it enables me to ascertain their social position and arrange my fees accordingly."

"CAN I change here for Glasgow?" said the old lady for the fifteenth time on the journey to the guard. "You can if you like, ma'am," said the official, cheerily, "but you'd better not if you want to get there."

"I WISH I were an ostrich," said Hicks, angrily, as he tried to eat one of his wife's biscuits and couldn't. "I wish you were," returned Mrs. Hicks. "I'd get a few feathers for my hat."

RAPTUROUS YOUTH: "Darling, my salary is five pounds a week. Do you think you could live on that?" His Affianced: "Why, yes, George. I can get along on that. But what will you live on?"

WHEN Charlie's mamma went upstairs after he had been put to bed, she found his eyes were closed, and he had all the appearance of being asleep. Then in a drowsy tone, and evidently in earnest, he said: "Guess, mamma, whether I'm asleep or awake."

"DID you take the note, and did you see Mr. Thompson, Jock?" "Yes, sir." "And how was he?" "Why, he looked pretty well, but he's very blind." "Blind? What do you mean?" "Why, while I was in the room he asked me what my hat was, and I'm blest if it wasn't on my head all the while!"

HE: "In spite of your answer, Miss Williston, I shall not give you up. 'Hope springs eternal in the human breast.'" SHE: "Oh, I'm so glad you take it that way! I was afraid you might go and offer yourself to Maud Uppington. You see, she and I are having a competition. I'm one proposal ahead of her now, and if you come round again that'll make two."

A RATHER eccentric old man, remarkable for his shrewdness, kept a pork shop. Some young fellows, thinking to have some fun with him, entered his shop one night, and asked what his pork was a yard. The old man promptly replied, "Five shillings." One of the fellows then said, "I'll take a yard." "Where is your money?" said the old man. The five shillings were laid down, which the old man quietly pocketed, and then produced three pig's feet with the remark: "Three feet make one yard."

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SOCIETY.

THE Empress Frederick is coming to England on a visit to the Queen at Windsor Castle and Buckingham Palace.

THE Prince and Princess of Wales will arrive at Marlborough House for the season on Monday, May 2nd.

THE Queen has graciously consented to be patroness of the Fisheries Exhibition to be held next year in Aberdeen, and it is hoped that her Majesty or the Prince of Wales will open it in person.

THE Emperor and Empress of Russia will receive their friends at the 1900 exhibition in Paris in a pavilion of their own. The plan has been submitted to them, and the estimated cost of the building is £90,000.

It is probable that our next social lion may be the new Shah of Persia, who is anxious to follow in the footsteps of Nasr-ed-din, his father, and visit London.

THE Duke and Duchess of Coburg hope to come to London about the middle of May, and spend a couple of months at Clarence House.

THE Queen is to be at Buckingham Palace for two or three days during the second week of May, probably from Monday the 9th until the following Thursday.

ELBOLIC light is being fitted into Balmoral. The plan is to be driven by water power instead of steam or gas, and the water for this purpose is to be obtained from the Golder, a stream which passes within about a mile from the Royal abode.

THE stay of the Court at Windsor Castle will extend over three weeks, as the Queen is to leave on the evening of Friday, May 20th, for Balmoral, and will stay in Scotland until after the Ascot race week.

THE first Drawing-room of the season proper is fixed for the 10th of May, and that it will be a large and a very distinguished function there can be no doubt. That the Queen will hold it in person is most probable, while it is very likely that her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales will also be present and will receive the general company when the Queen has left the throne-room.

THE King of Italy has recently conferred the title of Royal Highness, instead of Serene Highness, on the children of his cousin, the Duke of Genoa, who is also the Queen's brother. There is a possibility that one of them may some day become King of Italy. The public baptism of the infant son of the Duke of Genoa will take place in the Royal Chapel in Turin, early in May, when all members of the House of Savoy will be present. The Princess of Naples will be godmother and the Regent of Bavaria godfather.

THE Queen's thought for her wounded soldiers at Netley has taken a very kindly and practical shape. As the result of her recent visit, her Majesty has not only sent a number of handsomely-framed autograph portraits of herself for the walls of the various wards, and a series of "Jubilee" photographs, but also four specially made invalid couches and an order that artificial limbs of the finest description shall be supplied at her personal cost to all of her brave soldiers who may need them. Princess Henry of Battenberg has also sent a handsome photograph of her late husband.

"JESSIE," the Queen's own riding mare, is still a pet with her Majesty, although the riding-days of the Queen have long been passed. "Jessie" is twenty-seven years old, but she has not lost her beauty, and when her Royal mistress is at Windsor the black mare with the white cross on her forehead is frequently trotted out for the Queen's inspection. Another pet kept at Windsor is the Egyptian donkey, "Tewfik," brought from Cairo and presented to the Queen by Lord Wolseley. It is much larger than the ordinary English donkey, and has a white coat and abnormally long ears. The Queen owns a number of donkeys on her different estates, and it is interesting to note that each one lives in company with a horse.

STATISTICS.

THERE are 7,000 hawkers of newspapers in London.

THE death-rate of the sailors in the mercantile marine is 12 per 1,000—lower than on land.

THE bones and muscles of the human body are capable of over 1,200 movements.

THE average amount of sickness in human life is nine days out of the year.

THERE are nearly 270 different religions in the United Kingdom.

It is computed that when marching soldiers take 75 steps per minute, in quick marching 108, and in charging 180 steps.

THE University of Calcutta is said to be the largest educational corporation in the world. It examines more than 10,000 students annually.

GEMS.

UNSELFISH people are always polite, because good manners are only the absence of selfishness.

If we had it in our power to gratify every wish, we should soon feel the effects of a surfeit.

A MAN who does not know how to learn from his mistakes turns the best schoolmaster out of his life.

THE worst things are the perversions of good things. Abused intellectual gifts make the dangerous villain; abused sensibilities make the accomplished tempter; abused affections engender the keenest of all misery.

In our keen look at the strong, outward practicalities of life, do not let us forget its inmost secret of power; that all noble thoughts, all noble possibilities of life, spring out of this Love, or touch their finest meaning in it; that there is no factor like it in the make-up of the world.

HOUSEHOLD TREASURES.

FROSTED APPLES.—Stew some apples until the skins can be taken off easily; as each apple is peeled, dip it into clarified butter and cover with granulated sugar. Bake in a slow oven until they sparkle.

CREAM TOAST.—Cut six slices of delicate bread, one pint rich cream, butter, salt to taste. Toast bread brown, remove crust, butter and cut in four pieces. Arrange in a suitable dish, bring cream to a boil, with pinch of salt, pour over the toast, cover dish and serve.

RICH OMELETTE.—Add to one cup cold boiled rice four teaspoonfuls of milk, two eggs—whites and yolks beaten separately—and a half salt-spoonful of salt. Heat a tablespoonful of butter very hot in a frying-pan, then pour in the mixture, cover, and bake about ten minutes in a moderate oven until stiff. Double and turn out carefully on a hot platter.

FISH SCALLOPS.—Cod or any other firm fish can be used for this. Boil until done, take from the water, and flake to pieces with a fork. Make a cup of white sauce by cooking together a tablespoonful of butter and one of flour until they bubble, and adding a half pint of milk. Stir until thick, season with pepper and salt, and it is ready. Butter a pudding dish, place a layer of fish in the bottom, dot it with bits of butter, squeeze over it a very few drops of lemon juice, and moisten with a tablespoonful of the sauce. Proceed in this way until the dish is full, pouring the remainder of the sauce on the top-layer, strewing it with fine crumbs, and putting little pieces of butter on this instead of on the fish. Bake covered half an hour, uncover and brown. To one cup of the white sauce there should be from two to three of the fish.

MISCELLANEOUS.

THE last two descendants of Christopher Columbus are said to be occupants of a poorhouse in Cadix.

THE flying frog of Borneo has long toes, which are webbed to the tips. Its feet thus act as little parachutes, and enable the frog to leap from lofty trees and descend gradually.

THE Escorial Palace in Spain contains a cathedral, a monastery—with two hundred cells,—two colleges, three chapter houses, three libraries, and nearly three thousand other rooms.

It is estimated that over 80 tons of diamonds have been unearthed in the South African fields during the last 18 years. These represent a total value of £56,000,000.

THE quarries from which the ancient Greeks obtained their marble were lost for nearly 1,000 years, but were recently rediscovered, and are now being worked by an English company. They are near Larissa.

A RAW and delicious fruit will soon, it is believed, be obtainable in our markets. This is the luscious mangosteen of Malacca. Its flavour is supposed to be a nice combination of those of strawberry, nectarine, and pineapple.

In Paris the trees in the public streets are treated with as much attention as are the plants in botanical gardens. Officials look after their welfare, and as a result the streets are beautiful and comfortable.

It has been discovered that the native African chiefs in the diamond regions have great quantities of valuable diamonds which were accumulated years ago. They treasure them as charms, and are unwilling to sell them.

THE finest looking people of Europe are the Tziganes, or gipsies of Hungary. Physically they are splendid specimens of man and woman, and are rarely ill. So pure is their blood that their wounds quickly heal without the application of medicaments.

THE naming of vessels of the United States Navy is regulated by law. Vessels of the first class are required to be named after States, those of the second after rivers, those of the third after the principal cities and towns, and those of the fourth as the President may direct.

TRICYCLES are now used in Berlin. In these the driver works the treadles at the rear, and the passenger sits between the two front wheels. It is rather an old idea, but the modern device seems to have met with appreciation, and it is stated that there are now 500 of the tricycles in the German capital.

In the archives of the Spanish navy have been found the bills of the payment of the crews of Columbus's caravels. The sailors received from ten to twelve francs a month, including their food. The captains of the caravels had eighty francs a month. Columbus himself, as admiral, received sixteen hundred francs a year.

PERHAPS the smallest mall in the world is that which is despatched yearly to Tristan d'Acunha from St. Helena. The last annual mail carried ten letters, three newspapers, and two packages of books. Tristan d'Acunha is the principal of a group of three islets in the South Atlantic, the others being Nightingale Island and Inaccessible Island. Its population is but fifty-three.

It is a well-known fact that fish, like insects are attracted to any bright light; and a French entomologist has lately taken advantage of this circumstance in fishing for specimens in a pond. With a portable battery and a small incandescent electric lamp attached to a net he was able to secure a large number of fish, larvae, tadpoles, etc., at one operation. The net, measuring about a yard across, was slowly lowered into the water, and when it reached the bottom of the pond the little lamp above it was connected with the battery. All the living creatures within reach of the apparatus rushed towards the light, and were immediately secured in the net. It is obvious that the method is applicable on a far larger scale, and may prove to be of great service to night fishermen.

NOTICES TO CORRESPONDENTS.

A. M. G.—Put the matter into the hands of a solicitor at once.

CITY CLERK.—The great fire of London occurred on September 2nd to 6th, 1666.

FACOT.—We regret that we are not in a position to give the information desired.

R. G.—Apply to the Registrar of Designs, 25, Southampton-buildings, London, W.C.

JOAN.—The cost of an ordinary marriage license varies from £1 10s. to £2 12s. 6d.

NERVOUS DAVIDSON.—All that is required of him is a brief acknowledgment of the toast.

TRIOBLEN.—If there is no will the illegitimate daughter has no claim on the property.

LIGHT FANTASTIC.—Very high heels are detrimental to the health, and anything but pretty or good style.

WIGGINS.—You are bound by the conditions of the document you executed; it is a legal contract.

TAM O'SHANTER.—If taken at an annual rent, it is a yearly tenancy, and six months' notice must be given.

HEI BOLT.—Take it to a musical instrument maker; possibly they can give you something that will set it right.

J. L.—The Mont St. Gothard Tunnel is the longest in length. It is 43,540 feet, or 9 miles 840 yards in length.

INQUIRER.—There is what is called a language of stamps, but the thing is very silly and not worth insisting.

RED NOSE.—A red nose is usually the result of poverty of blood or faulty circulation, and the cure must aim at remedying both of these.

WOULD-BE NURSE.—All the romance in that line of life is bound up in books; the practical work of nursing is disagreeable in the extreme.

ONE IN GREAT TROUBLE.—If the furniture is the bona fide property of the wife it cannot be taken in satisfaction of the husband's debts.

MOVEMBER.—According to present custom, the length of time for remaining in mourning and all other special observances are left to individual feelings.

DOUBTFUL.—The quotation is from Longfellow's poem "The Day is Done." It is, however, not quite correct. The line reads, "And as silently steal away."

DAISY.—Damp the linen, strain it; when strained over a cup or basin of hot water, and well rub in some salts of lemon; when removed wash the whole.

THEY JIM.—It is a small insect of the grasshopper kind; the male makes a chirruping noise by rubbing one of its wings over another in calling upon the females.

LOVER AND HIS LARK.—Mistletoe is seldom found on oak bowdways. Most of that used at Christmas grows on apple-trees in the orchards of the West and Midlands.

CHRISTMAS BOX.—The Christmas tree is quite a modern innovation, so far as this country is concerned. It has only been introduced during the present century, and was brought over from the Continent.

A. M.—A will need not be prepared by a solicitor, and it does not require to be stamped. There must be two witnesses, who must sign in the presence of each other, and in that of the person making the will.

SKATER.—The coldest Christmas ever experienced in this country is believed to have been that of 1860, when the thermometer fell to thirteen degrees below zero. The intense frost, however, only lasted three days.

AN OLD READER.—The husband is not bound to make an allowance to the wife who has left him voluntarily; but, unless she has been guilty of misconduct entitling him to a divorce, he cannot legally refuse to receive her again if she wishes to return.

DOUBTFUL LOVER.—We do not think the case is one we can advise with any advantage; if the young man is so dull that he cannot gather from the general attitude of the girl what her feelings are towards him, we despair of our ability to assist you in the matter.

W. D.—It is possible for a person to learn shorthand without a teacher, but he is much more likely to run into a number of vexatious mistakes, which he will with difficulty discover later on, when experience reveals their existence to him; his better plan is to try to make a bargain with a teacher.

SMOKER.—If the pipe is of good, well-fired clay, it will not crack above the seasoning in the manner you suggest, provided always it is never lit when half empty; a good plan is to have a chamois leather sheath made to cover the pipe while the seasoning is proceeding.

A. C. N.—The preparation is to give it a thorough coat of rice paste, lay it on the card, put sheet of blotting or brown paper over it, rub out smartly from centre, right and left, with hands, to fasten and flatten it then lay aside to dry; card may curl a little, but should not be.

WRANGLER.—People is a collective noun; the word may be used alternatively with persons; you could say quite correctly "there were one or two people present;" but persons is usually employed where the numbers are small, while people is reserved for crowds or mobs.

FLOWER.—Yew is less used than either of the plants you mention as a Christmas evergreen. But its narrow, line-like leaves form an agreeable contrast to the broad and glossy ones of the ivy and holly. Among other evergreens sometimes used for church decorations at Christmas are bay, rosemary, and laurel; but these are not so much used as those mentioned.

OLD TIMES.

There's a beautiful song on the shumbrons air,
That drifts through the valley of dreams!
It comes from the clime where the roses were,
And a tuneful heart and bright brown hair,
That waded in the morning beams.

Soft eyes of azure and eyes of brower,
And snow-white foreheads, are there
A glimmering cross and glittering crown,
A thorny bud and a couch of down,
Lost hopes and leaflets of prayer.

A breath of spring in the breezy woods,
Sweet wafts from the quivering pines—
Blue violet eyes beneath green hoods,
A bubble of brooklets, a scent of buds,
Bird warblers and clambering vines.

A rosy wreath and a dimpled hand,
A ring and a slighted vow—
Three golden links of a broken band,
A tiny track in the snow-white sand,
A tear and a sinless brow.

There's a tincture of grief in the beautiful song
That sobe on the shumbrons air,
And loneliness felt in the festive throng
Sinks down on the soul as it trembles along
From a clime where the roses were.

We heard it first at the dawn of day,
And it mingled with matin chimers;
But years have distanced the beautiful lay,
And its melody floweth from the far-away,
And we call it now Old Times.

MY LADY BEETHA.—A little cotton wool wrapped round a stick, and dipped into eau-de-Cologne, or diluted alcohol mixed with glycerine, should be passed round the outline of the nail after washing the hands at night. This gives the beautiful blanched appearance to the surrounding skin, which is one of the chief aims of those whose hands are regularly manured.

WATKIN.—It will be a difficult matter for you to break off the acquaintance without incurring censure, and it may expose you to an action for breach of promise. But if you find upon conscientious self-examination that you do not and cannot love as a husband should, it would be folly, if not something worse, to take such a person for your wife.

MADDER.—One breakfast-cupful flour, half teaspoonful baking soda, quarter teaspoonful tartaric acid, three breakfast-cupfuls buttermilk, one egg; mix the dry things well, then beat up the egg and add the buttermilk to it, mix all smoothly together, give it a good beating, grease a griddle and pour the mixture in small round spots on it, turn them when brown on one side and cook the other.

SYMPATHISER.—Don Carlos is the son of a son of a son of Charles IV., king of Spain, while Alphonso XIII., the present king, is the son of a son of a daughter of Charles IV. The Salic law existed in Spain which forbade the crown to go to a woman. Ferdinand VII. set it aside in favour of his daughter Isabella, and by so doing caused his brother to claim the throne. Alphonso XIII. is a great grandson of Ferdinand VII., while Don Carlos is a grandson of Ferdinand's brother.

HOLLY.—There are many varieties of holly. Some bear yellow berries, but these are not so common as those bearing red or scarlet berries. Some sorts have yellow or golden-tipped leaves, some with white or silver-edged leaves, other varieties have leaves notched or saw-like, bristly, broad, or narrow, hairy or smooth, thick or thin, and some with variegated or blotched leaves. Its close-growing twigs and spinous leaves render it a favourite among farmers for hedges.

L. B. F.—The longest bridge in the world is beyond doubt the one over the Tay at Dundee, which is two and a half miles long, the one coming next being the Victoria over the St. Lawrence at Montreal, 1,650 feet shorter than the Tay Bridge; the highest in point of structure in the world is the Forth Bridge, 961 feet above sea level, but with just 152 feet of clear water under arch; the highest arch in the world is that of Bonar Bridge over Dornoch Firth, in Sutherlandshire, measuring no less than 315 feet from the water to crown of arch.

F. A. T.—We take it that it is a smoked ham you wish to boil; soak it for an hour or two in cold water, and when it boils draw it to the side of the fire, and let it boil gently for three hours, or three and a half hours, according to size and thickness; you say your ham is twenty-three pounds, which is more than the weight of one ham; but if you have a boiler large enough you can put two or three in at one. Rolled pork does not need to be soaked, but requires nearly the same time to boil when ready, take the skin off and rasp breadcrumbs on the top.

PARENT DICK.—Cleanliness of the cage is indispensable, and no animal or bird ever thrives well in uncleanly surroundings. The bottom of the cage should each morning be lined with dry, clean sand, containing a certain quantity of small pebbles, as these are beneficial to the health of cage-birds. Water, both for drinking and bathing, should be freshly supplied, and during the moulting season a bit of rusty iron in the drinking water is requisite. The food of canaries is canary seed and small brown rapeseed; occasionally a lettuce leaf; a slice of sweet apple in winter, and very rarely bruised hempseed. Sugar and bread are not wholesome.

MAIRIE.—Proceed by sewing fannel round a black beer bottle, then attach one end of lace to the fannel and wind it round carefully; when it is all on, cover with another bit of fannel or muslin, also sewed in its place, then rub gently with strong soapuds; if lace is very dirty, fill bottle with warm water and put on in pot of soda to boil a few minutes, next place under running tap to wash out the soap, wrap in coarse towel and set aside to dry leisurely, which may take several days. Another way is to make strong starch, melting a bit of white wax and sugar in it, dip the bottle into that two or three times, squeeze out surplus starch, dip bottle in cold water, take off top fannel, fill with hot water, and set aside to dry; when process is nearly complete, pick out lace and lay in a cool place.

SUBBEAN.—After cutting the chicken open down the back, pound the breast bones with a wooden mallet to flatten them a little. Lay the bird in a shallow baking tin with some slices of salt pork, and place the pan in hot oven. Pour a little salted water into the pan and frequently baste the chicken with it while it is in the oven. Let it remain until about half cooked, then take it from the pan and place it upon a broiler over a clear fire. Broil the under side of the chicken, and then turn it and cook the skin side to a delicate brown. When cooked place it upon a heated platter, sprinkle it with salt and pepper and pour some melted butter over it. Scatter chopped parsley over the whole. A chicken cooked in this manner has all the delicate flavour of broiling, and will be more thoroughly and evenly cooked.

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